

PANEL DISCUSSION

Conversations with Eric Hobsbawm

*Eric Hobsbawm in discussion with
Shahid Amin, Neeladri Bhattacharya and Hari Vasudevan**
Chair: Romila Thapar

P.C. Sen: Professor Hobsbawm, Dr. Romila Thapar, eminent panel of historians and friends. Professor Hobsbawm certainly requires no introduction to any group of intellectuals anywhere in the world, and certainly not to those interested in history. As Director of the Centre, I would like to say that it is a great privilege for us to have in our midst Professor Hobsbawm. This is for the Centre one of its most memorable events. Thank you for being with us.

Romila Thapar: This is a rare occasion to have someone with the intellectual stature of Professor Eric Hobsbawm to be here to indulge in a conversation with us. We have to thank primarily the Book Review Literary Trust, and for this occasion, the IIC; but much more so, we have to thank Professor Eric Hobsbawm for having taken the trouble to come to give lectures and participate in the discussions.

This morning's discussion will focus around certain themes, not rigidly so, but we would like to keep it reasonably within the channels suggested. The first is that of the craft of the historian, which has been exemplified particularly in his four volumes on the unfolding, as it were, of the modern age; what went into the creation of modernity, which he discusses so lucidly in these volumes. The other theme is of course, his great contribution to the question of Marxism in history. For many of us, certainly for me, reading him on this subject was a paradigm shift.

And then, he has talked about the emergence of the modern world, and obviously this relates to contemporary events. He has been throughout his life but more so recently, a commentator on contemporary events, and a commentator who has been taken very very seriously, as he should be. For me

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at least one of the things that his work demonstrates is that if you have a tested, reliable method of analysis, you can apply it to virtually all human activities. He has done that where, beyond four volumes, he has looked at questions like social banditry on one side. And of course one aspect, one subject that many people don't know of is his amazing study of jazz musicians and jazz as the articulation of the twentieth century. So these are roughly the things that we will be discussing; but of course, if there are others that come up, fine.

Shahid Amin: Thank you very much, Professor Thapar. I will come to the point straightaway. Like a lot of us middle-aged historians who are here, we were brought up on Penguin Books and Christopher Hill/Eric Hobsbawm/Edward Thompson. What I propose to do today is try and initiate a dialogue by picking up some of the issues connected with the craft of the historian in Professor Hobsbawm's collection of essays, *On History* (1997). Before coming here I picked up another book by a major historian with the same title, Fernand Braudel's *On History*. Addressing the issue of how historians relate to the ageing of their own writings, Braudel puts in an interesting disclaimer: He writes in the Preface to that book: "Like everyone else, I cannot recognise my own voice when I hear it recorded, nor am I sure I can recognise in any real sense my thoughts of yesterday on re-reading them."

Some of the reflections gathered in Professor Hobsbawm's *On History* consist of major essays -- sturdy classics like "From Social History to the History of Society" (*Daedalus*, Winter, 1972), or "What do Historians Owe to Karl Marx" (1969). But there are also recent interventions, in terms of staking a claim for the responsibility of the historian in the context of the growing importance of ethnicity and identity history. And that is what I wish to broach today.

According to Hobsbawm, the responsibility of the historian consists in a large part in insisting on the supremacy of evidence, and stressing the centrality of the distinction between verifiable historical fact and fiction. This responsibility is all the more pressing today. It is very important because historians must act as whistle-blowers, so to speak, pointing out the ways in which the recourse or 'appeal to history' often lies at the bottom of xenophobia, majoritarianism, even nationalism. Historians have to be constantly on guard in such matters; for "History" says Hobsbawm, "is the raw material for nationalist or ethnic or fundamentalist ideologies as poppies are the raw material for heroin addiction." And we all know where the best poppy fields of the world are!

Further, in the last essay, Professor Hobsbawm also argues strongly against ‘identity history’, or history written for particular peoples. History which is designed only for Jews or for Americans, for instance, cannot be good history, though it may be a comforting history for those whose history it is made out to be. This is the central theme of two of the essays, “Inside and Outside History” and “Identity History is not Enough” that frame the book.

Hobsbawm also refers pointedly to the long after-life of the idol of the young Ram Lalla at Ayodhya, *circa* 1949, whose aftermath in India, historians and Muslims alike -- and everybody else -- have experienced variedly. For the last fifteen years or so we in India have been confronted with a kind of a conversation stopper which goes something like this: ‘*This maybe your History; but this is my/our Past.*’ And this has a lot to do with the certitudes on which both nationalism and assertive majoritarianism thrive. What I wish to probe today is whether the responsibility of the historian ends simply by asserting the primacy of fact over imaginings; I ask this because, as we have seen in some of the recent Indian history-writings, a great deal of the productive engagement of historians comes precisely where we don’t simply assert the centrality of facts, but try and get inside the narratives that underpin a particular construction of those facts, or particular imaginings of the past.

I realise there is a fashionable trend of saying ‘anything goes’, that facts are constructions; but I think the polarity that Professor Hobsbawm posits between fact and fiction, “either Elvis Presley is dead or he isn’t”, as he says at one place, is putting it too starkly. That is because a lot of us who are in the business of history-writing in these charged surroundings have to really engage with the ways in which communities come into being, by also giving a particular kind of narrative of ‘their’ pasts to themselves. So I don’t think it is enough to condemn the more fashionable or the more extravagant forms of doing narrative history, one has to engage with the ways in which the craft of history, the craft of the historians, has to be enriched. This would require the historian to look into his or her tool-kit, perhaps borrowing other people’s tools, but using these in novel, imaginative ways. It is in this context that I find that Professor Hobsbawm has posed the history/ fiction opposition in too sharp a manner.

I wish to tie this to the kind of statements that we find in Professor Hobsbawm who, both for his doctoral thesis on the pre-1914 Fabians, and on his work on primitive and archaic forms of rebellion (*Primitive Rebels*, 1959), did in fact go out and talk to the people, which would not have appealed to the

contemporary, mainstream historians. He says at one place that the reason why he chose Latin America rather than South-East Asia for studying his 'primitive rebels', was because he had a better access to those people, and to their language.

Now, when 'On History from Below' we read such statements such as oral history has "not yet stimulated enough methodological thinking"; or that, as he puts it memorably, "in my opinion we shall never make adequate use of oral history until we work out what can go wrong in memory with as much care as we now know what can go wrong in transmitting manuscripts by manual copying", we find these a bit dated. An apt analogy, no doubt, but I guess we could push it, and reframe our concerns as follows: What goes wrong in the transcriptions of peasant testimony in a court of law, or in an official report on a riot by an official of the state or a magistrate? So it is not simply a question of a person's familial memory -- the grandson's memory, shall we say -- but of the ways in which our access to the deeds, actions, consciousness of the ordinary people are mediated, and presented in a kind of archive which was not created for the historian, but for the magistrate or the judge. The peasant accused in a court whose testimony we use is not speaking to the historian; he is talking to the judge.

There is a lot that historians, have to do, confronted with newer issues in the writing of the history of the unlettered: to be concerned with the crafting of the prose that they write. I am not saying this as a fashionable historian, one who is sold on the latest fashion. I am saying this as an historian who has learnt a lot from what Hobsbawm himself recollects about his first forays as a doctoral student. He writes (p.232):

I began my career as a young historian interviewing survivors of the pre-1914 Fabian Society about their time, and the first lesson I learned was that they were not even worth interviewing unless I had found out more about the subject of the interview than they could remember.

So there is a fundamental sense in which both Professor Hobsbawm and I, operating on the kind of materials that I work on in India, are committed to the archive. We are not arguing for a fanciful oral history; we are arguing for historians who march outwards from the archive so as to have a more meaningful dialogue with the inheritors of events, at the present site of past actions.

And therefore I think that the polarity of fiction and fact, or the kind of danger lights that we see flashing towards the end of the book, about historians being completely swept away by the latest post-modern

fashion, is to put the issues in a manner where the responsibility of the historian -- of providing verifiable facts -- assumes a greater gravity than refashioning the craft of the historian. It might be necessary for telling why a story has been told in a particular way, and how we can incorporate that in the telling of *our* story.

Eric Hobsbawm: First, on the craft of the historian. In a way, all historians, I think, must assume that what we are talking about is something real, something that is objectively there, namely what happened in the past. At the same time it is not enough to do that, since the past is only accessible via the questions we ask of it. The nature of these questions is something which, as Shahid has quite rightly said, requires very careful analysis by ourselves to know what we are doing. Nevertheless, my reason for stressing evidence is that we are basically talking or trying to discover something that actually happened; and the difference between fact and fiction appears to me to be quite fundamental. I dare say, for instance, there are well-known myths in most countries that famous leaders did not really die but survived -- the Emperor Barbarossa will come back again one day, he is hidden in some cave until he comes back. Now, the myth itself is a fact and therefore requires analysis and study as such; but whether the Emperor Barbarossa is dead or not is something that can be established, and however hard you may want to believe he is still there somewhere or other, he isn't. That is, I think, the beginning as you might say, and I think we are all in agreement on that.

Second, the questions we ask also to some extent determine the sources we use. Clearly, traditionally, at least in Western history as it developed in a scholarly fashion from the end of seventeenth century on until the middle of the nineteenth, they were thinking primarily of documents left and preferably documents collected together in archives. However, we now know that these are by no means the only sources. Almost anything which helps us to answer questions is a source. However, the essence of the craft of the historian has been, to begin with, source criticism. You have to know what is in the archives, whether they are lying if they are not lying, whether they are in fact somehow or other making mistakes. And this applies to any kind of source that we find: we are talking about oral history. It also applies if we are talking about, for instance, iconographic history, which is becoming increasingly important. In future for instance, it will become absolutely essential for people to have serious source criticism of photographs, since it is so easy nowadays to play around with photographs. So source criticism is essential; and this is why even though the people who engage in this activity often appear to be very boring, they are absolutely fundamental.

Without it we don't know what we can do. Our statements about the past have to be logically coherent, coherent with the other evidence and the rest of the argument.

And finally, we have to communicate. It is in the nature of communication that I think the greatest danger arises; because communication itself is a different kind of craft. It is possible to produce an extremely dry, factual statement. For instance, the compilation of documents or of dictionaries minimises the dangers of communicating in an emotional or in a biased way. Nevertheless, communication itself has risks, and these risks, which we have to be aware of.

There are three other elements in the craft of a historian which we need to be aware of. One is the famous statement by the English novelist, L.P. Hartley: "the past is another country, they do things differently there." Essentially, this is another way of saying that the greatest sin of a historian of the craft is anachronism: to think in contemporary terms about things which were different. It takes a lot of experience eventually, because initially people believe that people in the past were exactly the same. Well, in some respects they are exactly the same; but what they did and how they did and why they thought about it was not necessarily the way we do it. It is absolutely essential to be aware of this. The second is that you have to try and understand what they *are*, not merely that they are different. But to some extent try and think yourself into the way you think that they thought too, empathy, if you like. It's essential, but it is not enough. I was brought up as a student by people who thought that the only thing to do is that you study a period until you can hear the people talk, and that is enough. It isn't enough but you have got to do it. And the third, which is one reason why I am such a great admirer of Braudel, is sheer curiosity. Historians simply have to be curious about anything they see, particularly the things which are not particularly evident, things by the side of the archives or by the side of sources. And Braudel, a very great historian, once told me, he said historians are never on a holiday, on vacation. They are always, so to speak on the job. Whenever, he said, I get into a train, I learn something. And I think it is very important because this is another way of saying, 'be open to new phenomenon'.

So much for the rules of the game, if you like the conventions of the game, which historians practise. That brings me to the question of responsibilities. The responsibilities today are very largely negative, and that is to say to fight against the abuses of history. Over the past thirty years we have been living in a period when probably there has been more mythology, inventions, lying about history than in any other in my lifetime, long though it is, for various reasons. For instance, take an obvious case: in Europe for about fifty years

after World War II, a large amount of history was tacitly frozen. For instance, it became very, very difficult to discuss the other side: Fascism, Nazis -- they could only be seen as it were, as something evil, something against us. The mere fact that Germans too suffered in World War II was something which people hesitated to say. So after about fifty years, after the end of the Cold War, a number of areas were opened up. And this made it possible not only to restore, let us say, Italian or German Fascism into a historical setting, but also to revive the kind of historical myths and lies which were associated with it.

The second and obvious responsibility relates to the enormous rise of 'identity history'. Nationalist history is a very good example, but this also includes religious, communal, or other collective history. You can observe this in the last thirty years, which have been the great period of the creation of historical museums, historical sites and 'theme parks'. For example, two national history museums have been created in Germany, one in Japan in the 1980s. But creating a historical site or historical museum means starting with a view of history. All this raises controversial questions. This is true both in the United States and in other countries. In the United States itself you can see how historical exhibitions like war memorials, memorials of the Holocaust, memorials of the first atom bomb, immediately raise historic problems, problems of historic interpretation, and eventually may represent a very biased view. There has been more of this in the past thirty years for various historical reasons. The breakup of empires has created, as it were, an enormous emptiness.

New countries, new states, require two things. They require a flag and they require history -- without those two things they don't even exist. And the people who establish them are not really interested in history in the way which the craftsmen of history are. They are interested in something which will make everybody feel good. Generally they are interested in foundation myths and these foundation myths tend inevitably to be rather mythological. This is an absolutely general problem. A friend of mine, at the moment, has just been doing something that nobody else has done before. She has gone along the course of the Long March in China, she has re-done the Long March, talking to survivors, going around the local archives, to see what they said at the time about when the Red Army came through. Now the Long March is, in the case of China, a foundation myth. And there is no question about it that it will not emerge without considerable changes from this attempt to see it again, sixty years, seventy years later. So these are some of these new, historical myths or 'inventions of tradition'. Some of these are fairly harmless, but a number of them are politically dangerous. I do not have to explain to you who have been living through a bitter battle about what goes into text-books of schools, into school manuals, of the issues which I am now

raising. To conclude, very briefly, it is essential to make a distinction between fact and fiction. Am I too crude? I don't think so.

To put it a different way, let us go from pure mythology to what is reasonable history as a number of very good historians are practising it. We particularly, people like myself, Marxists and so on, were interested not merely in re-creating and restoring and describing what there was in the past but in explaining it. But there is today among historians also, a tendency that is less interested in explanation but more in 'meaning'. What does it 'mean' and to whom? To us. Who are 'we', to whom this 'meaning' is so important? The question seems to me to be absolutely essential because, in a sense, 'meaning' is a thing about which you can go on arguing; 'meaning' is a concept in which there is no clear distinction between what happened and what didn't happen. The same thing may mean something completely different. I am fundamentally against trying to mix up the search for meaning with the search for historical explanation. 'Meaning' is not something to which the craft of the historian can apply.

However, the search for meaning can, incidentally, produce very interesting history. For instance, there has been an enormous amount, a huge fashion once again in the last twenty to thirty years, for memory and memories -- which are really not about what happened, but what people thought and felt about what happened. This is not history, but history at one remove. There are also historians who deal with history at two removes or three removes. Now, all this has produced a quantity of pretty stupid stuff but, incidentally, it has produced some extremely interesting studies as for example about the memories of war. The great French series which really began it all is called 'the places, the locations of memory'. While this has opened up, new historic sources that have become available. I am suspicious of this trend because I am suspicious of people who say "I have my truths, never mind what your truth is, my truth is important even though you have got evidence on your side." To me it is important to believe that this occurred, and not something else. So the problem of mythology is a danger which isn't only something that divides historians from politicians and ideologists, but runs within the historical profession itself. I do believe the difference between fact and fiction, what can have been demonstrated and what people felt about it and so on, and what they feel about it now, is absolutely central.

Neeladri Bhattacharya: Professor Hobsbawm, as you know, is one of the greatest Marxist historians of our time. So I will focus on Marxist history as he and others within the British Marxist tradition have

practised it. I will limit myself to four sets of questions and comments. First, about British Marxist history: I would like to persuade you, Professor Hobsbawm, to talk a bit about your own intellectual location within British Marxism. When we talk of British Marxist historians we generally refer to four or five names together, that is: E.P.Thompson, Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, Rodney Hilton, and Victor Kiernan -- as if you all belonged to a homogenous, unified collective that spoke with the same voice, and read history the same way. Of course you were in some way all part of a collective movement. But I would like to understand the differences amongst you -- differences that I think were profound.

If we are looking at British Marxist history I think we can point to at least two distinct traditions, both feeding into each other, nurturing each other and also complementing each other, but possibly still very different. One is a tradition whose lineage can be traced back to William Morris, to John Ruskin, to the anti-enlightenment tradition, to the Romantics and to early Marx. It is a tradition of Marxism which focuses most often on the study of the folk or the community; and it explores the values, norms, perceptions of the people. It is a tradition that tends to research on pre-industrial England or other pre-industrial societies, studying the artisans, the peasants, the commoners in the forests, and others who were in some ways facing the onslaught of capitalism and the forces of modernity. It looks at the ways in which they confront capitalism, and resist changes within their lives. It is a history that explores the *cultural* ways of living more than the social, economic and political processes of transformation.

There is a second tradition within British Marxist history, which is much more skeptical of anti-enlightenment thought, and more critical of Romanticism. It focuses more on *political* economy rather than on culture, and looks more at the macro-processes of societal changes than on the everyday lives of people. It studies the economic, social, political changes which led to the making of the modern world, and growth of capitalism. The first, therefore, in some ways focuses more on culture, the second on the economy; the first focuses more on the micro level, and its temporal and spatial focus is more limited; the second focuses on macro developments. In some ways I think E.P.Thompson symbolises the first tradition and you, Professor Hobsbawm, are an embodiment of the second. Of course you have written on the primitive rebels, on the bandits, on the tramping artisans; you have written extensively about 'small people', the workers and peasants. But if we look at your overall work, it is clear that you are looking at the larger processes of the development of capitalism -- economic, social, cultural -- and you see certain economic and political 'developments' as determining the trajectory of history. In the first three volumes, *Age of Revolution*, *Age of Capital*, *Age of Empire*, the initial chapters deal with these 'developments' and

then follow the consequences -- cultural, social and others. Within the first tradition, particularly in the writings of E.P. Thompson, there is a much greater emphasis on the cultural constitution of reality, an emphasis that is not simply to be associated with post-modernism. In your argument the economic and political changes appear to be more important in looking at what happens to culture, society and social institutions.

How do you perceive these differences? Why is it that E.P. Thompson or you never really talked about these differences? All of you have commented on other traditions, but not so much on the internal differences within the Marxist history tradition.

Second: I would like to make a few comments on your specific work on capitalism and industrialisation. You argue in the *Age of Revolution* and the *Age of Capital* that the industrial transformation that began in the 1770s and 1780s, took off in the early nineteenth century, matured around 1850s and became dominant by late nineteenth century. In recent historical writing many of these assumptions have been disputed. The argument that England was the first industrial nation and that the industrial revolution began in the 1780s, and matured by the mid-nineteenth century is under question in many ways. It has been argued that the developments in England were not as dramatic as was earlier presumed, that the peasantry really did not disappear to the extent that was earlier suggested -- a suggestion that you affirm in your own writings, and that the peasantry actually survived in a variety of ways through the nineteenth century.

It has been also argued that the technological developments in England were not as dramatic as was earlier supposed, that the factory industries did not really dominate the economic scene in the nineteenth century. It is only in the early twentieth century that factory production really becomes important. In the nineteenth century the industrial population was predominantly outside the factory sector, and proto-industrialisation, small-scale artisanal production, was very significant. The nature of this capitalism had implications for the formation of English society -- the nature of its bourgeoisie. And this is an argument that is developed not by conservative historians alone, but also by radical Marxist historians -- Raphael Samuel, Perry Anderson and others. How would you today look back at your writings and react to these revisionist arguments?

But a few quick comments on your criticism of post-modernism, which has been raised by Shahid Amin earlier. I would like to broaden the discussion here a bit. I have read all your comments on post-modernism, in your own biography as well as in *On History* and other places. You see post-modernism as a

dangerous tradition and you are very apprehensive of the ideas associated with it. But could we not suggest that there are traditions within post-modernism which are not possibly as dangerous as you seem to think; that post-modernism, just like Marxism, has its variety, has its traditions. And many of the assumptions and ideas that were formulated within British Marxism have in fact been re-figured and re-articulated within post-modernism. One could argue for instance, that post-modernism in some way is critiquing earlier modernist teleologies, which look at the transformation and development of history from the Age of Un-reason to the Age of Reason, from the Age of Barbarism to Civilisation, from irrationality to rationality -- teleologies that legitimated the identity and arrogance of modernity itself. Is it not important for Marxists to transcend these teleologies?

Post-modernism, one could also argue, is questioning the claims of universal reason and is trying to look at other voices, other reasons, other ways of looking, other ways of making sense of the world. And these are things which all of you within the Marxist tradition were arguing for, of course in a different way, when you were looking at other people's ideas, visions and utopias, perceiving history from the bottom up. Post-modernism similarly, is looking at the cultural constitution of the real world and arguing that culture -- symbols, signs, and metaphors -- have a constitutive role in shaping the 'real'. Is it not true that all of you, many of you, were also arguing in a different language that culture is important? E. P. Thompson particularly was arguing this powerfully.

When looking at the traditions within post-modernism, can we not identify a range of ideas that can be productively appropriated to deepen Marxist historical thinking? This has been done by many Marxist scholars across the world, within critical legal theory, within gender studies and within Marxist history. Can we not have a more open attitude, critical but not dismissive, marking our differences with other traditions but also internalising any rich and fruitful idea they may throw up, whether this is within post-modernism or any other critical thought? Reading your biography I felt that you are extremely charitable to the traditions up to the 1980s; but you are extremely critical of all the traditions after 1980. You are very generous in your comments on the *Annales*, even when politically *many* French historians you admire are very conservative. But you are less generous about the more recent radical tendencies within history, anthropology, and critical theory.

Eric Hobsbawm Yes, you are quite correct in saying that there are different trends, if you like, that British Marxist historians were not a homogeneous group at all. They happened to be Marxist but they didn't particularly stress the differences within the group until rather later. At a later stage for instance, there was no question about it that E. P. Thompson became much more critical of the classical Marxist views.

About the group itself, I think that we must understand is that we were not simply a Marxist group. We were the representatives in England of a broad trend, a historical trend which begins in the 1890s and reached its peak in the 1950s and '60s. This was essentially one of criticising the classical, conventional, political, institutional archive-based history of the nineteenth century, and broadening it out to bring in the findings of social science, economics, sociology, social anthropology -- some of these were actually being created at that very time, sociology, social anthropology for example. Now it so happened that this was an international trend. In Great Britain, for reasons which would take us too far, the small group of Marxist historians played a disproportionately important part in it. For instance we provided, or at least founded, the journal *Past and Present* in which the modernisers in history, irrespective of their ideology, could express themselves through an organ of this particular movement. In France, the equivalent was the review *Annales*, which happened to have very much stronger institutional backing but which had not any Marxist component -- the Marxist component in France was not important. The *Annales* had different roots: sociology; French historical geography; statistics. So also in other countries. Nevertheless all these modernisers felt themselves to be fighting the same fight against conventional conservative historiography, even if they were ideologically at odds with each other. For instance, my teacher in Cambridge, the teacher of most of the young Marxists was Mounia Postan, an economic historian who happened to be a very passionate anti-Marxist and anti-communist; and yet Postan himself knew that the young Marxists were on his side against the conservatives, as we knew that he and other people were. So we must not isolate British Marxist history from this broad current. It is very important because this broad current on the whole was victorious, at least in Europe, after the second World War.

Because of this, my generation of historians, both in France and in Britain and a little later in Germany, were in effect the transformers of history; and they transformed history. Historical text-books can't be written today as they once were. Even the most conventional ones are written differently from what they would be in those days. So that's important. And one of the reasons why the British Marxists didn't really discuss their internal differences is because we were all part of a general scene. We found for instance, that

when we founded *Past and Present*, we wanted it to be a sort of broad popular front of all the modernists. After a few years when we had established ourselves, the people who wanted to work with us said, “Well, you are Marxists, we are not prepared to work for something which calls itself a journal of scientific history.” “Well”, we said, “it doesn’t matter what the hell you call it, if we are all on the same side, work with us.” So, we dropped the sub-title, and people like Lawrence Stone or even people like Sir John Eliot, later the Regius Professor at Oxford and by no means a left-winger, had been working with us. In actual fact we never had the slightest difficulty over the years which followed; no problems arose on ideological grounds in choosing and discussing contributions.

However, this broad movement of which the Marxists were part began to run into difficulties from the 1970s on. And therefore there is a generational problem here. Those who belong to my generation are out of sympathy with the new history which came into being in the 1970s. One way it is different, to make one slightly marginal point, is this. Most Marxist historians had been pioneers, among other things, in what is called ‘social history’ but is essential ‘history from below’ -- the history of ordinary people, concentrating not on the history of big decision makers but of peasants and workers and eventually women, although the women didn’t start getting interested in this until after 1968. We started a little earlier actually, but it was only after 1968 that the market began to want lectures on these themes. However, paradoxically, being interested in the history of the popular, the common people, while it is naturally attractive to Marxists who became Marxist largely because they were politically radical, has no intrinsic connection with Marxism. It is perfectly possible to be a radical historian interested in grass-roots history without being at all Marxist.

And indeed the radical historians since the 1970s have gone on, as it were, to some extent stressing lower-class history in a non-Marxist way: subaltern history in India, or the sort of *History Workshop Journal*, or the so-called ‘everyday history’ in Germany. These people have become critical, though they call themselves on the left. I don’t know whether the subaltern people do so still in India, but in other countries they still do; but they are not practising history in a Marxist fashion. One of the reasons why the old Marxists find that they are not very satisfactory is because they don’t ask questions. They are not interested in explanations. They are so interested in actually getting down to the grass roots that what they find there is enough for them; and that has been my own particular scepticism about some of this.

However, this means that even people practising the same kind of history began to change their tone in the 1970s. I tried to put it in the following way in my autobiography. My generation of historians was inspired by reading a book like Braudel on the Mediterranean, which was a gigantic book trying to explain, to draw everything together. The key text for the new page of history is probably the famous paper by Clifford Geertz on the Balinese cock-fight. That is, in the post-Hobsbawm generation, including your left-wing historians, if you ask what is it that actually attracts them in history, it is that second kind of approach. Now, both of these approaches are enormously intelligent and good; but they have, as it were, a different tone. My own feeling is that we have been drifting away from what Laurence Stone quite rightly called asking the big 'why' in questions. This is what my generation finds troublesome. That is one reason why, I think, we find ourselves critical or sceptical of post-modernism, largely because it is much more interested in meaning rather than explanation.

It is also true that Marxism once shared some assumptions, if you like teleological assumptions, which certainly have had to be abandoned in history, namely the idea that somehow history marched in one direction only -- for instance, from traditional to modern society, from the non-secular to secular, or for that matter, as we used to say, in one line, from feudalism to capitalism and then to socialism. Teleology, I'm afraid has had to be dropped; experience has shown that the results of history cannot be predicted. The only people who still believe in teleology are economic Neo-Liberals who argue that we have actually got to the 'end of history', today. Which is clearly not so.

Let me just end with one small observation about the British Marxist historians. Actually, though there is this difference between more 'culturalist' Marxists like Edward Thompson and myself, none of us were really economic historians, or basically interested in economic history. Most Marxists concurred essentially with what in those days Marxists called the interaction between the 'base' and 'super-structure'. Most of us, I think, with one or two exceptions, underestimated the importance of culture for historical analysis -- although some important Marxists particularly among social anthropologists, Eric Wolf and others, have since corrected this. However, if there is a historic or a cultural origin to English Marxism, most English Marxists would have come to history from literature rather than economics. We became economic historians because at that time economic history was, as it were, the only hook on which people with a Marxist interest in history could hang our hat; but basically we haven't been major contributors to economic history as distinct from social history. At least in England we haven't. Originally, probably our interests were mostly literary. I myself got into history by that route. Here

perhaps, there is a difference between continental and British Marxism: we did not have the philosophical interests which people would have had on the continent. Philosophy wasn't part of our secondary school training. I don't think we have the very strong philosophic interest which probably Indians brought up in the Indian tradition might also develop, which I find for instance when talking to people like Amartya Sen.

One final remark: I believe, that the Marxist way of asking explanatory questions becomes more and more central today. While historians have spent too much time arguing about what history can't tell you or whether it can tell you anything, in actual fact history has been transformed by the natural sciences, led by biology. And consequently the question, the basic question which is central to Marxism, central to any history, namely the evolution of the species *homo sapiens* from the start to where we are now, has become absolutely central once again. Thanks to DNA analysis, we have for the first time an effective chronology of the human race, at what stage it originated, perhaps maybe 200,000 years ago, at what stage large parts of it left, or bits of it left Africa perhaps 50-100,000 years ago... We can follow the chronology of its distribution across the world and all sorts of things like this. And three things follow from this. First, we now have for the first time something which Marx and all the others called for, namely, a proper framework for *world* history, for global history, something which will allow us to break with the essentially sectional character of history, regional history, national history. We must now break with this, and see our history as part of a general worldwide movement.

Second, the new perspective makes it clear how incredibly brief human history is, not merely by astronomical standards but by paleontological standards; and what is more, its remarkable acceleration. For most of the time it moved relatively slowly except at the early stage, which the greatest English Marxist, V. Gordon Childe, called the Neolithic revolution; but after that things settled down. From some time in say, the sixteenth century, it keeps increasingly accelerating. Over the past century, indeed over the last half century, this speeding-up has reached a rate when even long-term social changes operate at the rate of political changes. What in the past would have been long-term trends over centuries happens suddenly, like the communications revolution. The Internet is barely ten years old, and now operates at the speed at which we normally think of the changes in cabinets. Now, this calls for, I think, a complete methodological change. For instance, it eliminates the fashion which was very popular at one time, for explaining everything by socio-biology, inheritance, gene inheritance. History is simply not long enough for this to have happened. In other words, we require for history a specific means of analysing history. Historical evolution cannot be adequately covered by socio-biology.

Paradoxically, historical evolution rests on the inheritance of acquired characteristics -- you might say it is Lamarck's revenge on Darwin via human history! Acquired characteristics are inherited culturally by learning and memory, but not via genes. And that is essentially what provides a specific subject matter for history, for the historical evolution of history. And it is here, it seems to me, that it is essential to return to the old-fashioned Marxist approach, which has long been the approach of pre-historians and archaeologists, namely, to think of history primarily, in terms of modes of production. Call them what you like, it is essentially the technological or social innovations which transform everything. For instance, the invention of agriculture happened to be something that was done in different parts of the world in different ways. In all cases it transformed societies.

A lot of post-modernists explain there isn't anything to say about history, it is construction. Other people say all history is narrative, which narrative is right doesn't really matter, different narratives have equal value. But the new perspective on evolution gives us a subject which remains as real as it was before post-modernism, and to which it is time to return. And at this point the Marxist approach will be, in some ways it will be more useful than before -- because the alternative long-term and evolutionary approaches have run out of steam since the mid-seventies. The enormous stimulus provided by social anthropology has also, I'm afraid weakened, because social anthropology has been unfortunately more ruined by post-modernism than other fields. In fact, Marxists are among the few who go on believing that there is a history; and the evolutionary history of the human species has to be done historically, not in any other way. Let me hope that others will discover that the Marxists are still as useful as they once were.

Hari Vasudevan. Professor Hobsbawm, the vision that you presented over the past few minutes concerning the way in which we should go about our job is so vast that I feel a bit worried about posing a prosaic set of questions of that vision. But as a Marxist you would agree that even though sometimes possibilities, opportunities and visions can be grand, the path towards them can be so problematic, that it is necessary for us to work with humble categories.

The first problem that I want to ask you about in this regard, is the importance of the category of 'community'. In *Age of Extremes* you have spoken of the late twentieth century. You have described it as a period of uncertainty and of enmity rather than one in which things are well held together; but you have also described it as a period of great formations. Hence one may talk in terms of say, the decline of

the Soviet Union and its ultimate disintegration as having unleashed a series of uncertainties which have not been creative for our lives. But nevertheless from within this, by your own admission, a system of transnational or international activity has been intensified. In the circumstances we can actually see various communities form in the world around us.

Now, is it not for the historian as he deals with change to think both in terms of transient categories such as 'community' as well as great problems (you are asking him to pose)? Here he would have to think, through ever-changing communities and through other formations which ultimately must limit him and direct him. In your case I would say that despite your enormous interest in global history and world history, despite the national dispassion in many ways with which you approached your own work, ultimately you have always been, in many senses a European historian. And a European historian of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who through the time that he has lived has been able perhaps to look beyond the experiences of the immediately modern.

As a person who has been working with Europe, as a person who has been preoccupied with communities, it has always struck me that to you as a Marxist, a community is first and foremost something which is transitory; something which forms and un-forms, is created in different ways, either through the traditions that are constructed around it or the social processes that form it. Do you not tend to understate consequently, the importance of community, its authority and power?

A second problem is this: It is a fact that Europe has become increasingly self-conscious, self-aware, and very gradually since the Second World War, many historical traditions with which it was associated came to be better defined and better constituted.

This is an idea which you have always been slightly reluctant to engage with. I can see at one level that this is probably because of the strength of the communities that perhaps form Europe. The very fact that your own experience of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led you into various investigations which confirmed the strength of smaller national communities, whether it be the French, the Italian or the English.

But I think one of the most interesting phenomena of the 1990s and now increasingly the 2000s, especially after the events that took place in the Middle East last year, has been that quite clearly it is possible to think

in terms of an area of activity centered on the European continent which is capable of dynamism, which is perhaps not entirely driven in an inward direction. When you point out the importance of the European community's economic activities your sense of this is there somewhere. But what increasingly seems to be the case is that this Europe is beginning to look outwards as Europe, rather than as France, Germany or Britain. At least from a distance it would appear to be so. And you do not attribute significance to this.

I would have said that not only is it important to for us, at a distance, to acknowledge that certainly something is happening; but also to query what is happening. This is not a standard state or a formation like the United States. This is a more complex formation that we actually see taking place which deals in terms of neighbourhoods, federations of nations, constitutions that are meant to be handling those problems. It is in fact a highly innovative phenomenon that we see unravelling before us.

In this context I would just like to pose a specific question to you. Is Europe a meaningful thing in the world today? Would you actually be able to think of Europe not just in geographical terms, but in broader cultural and other terms which would draw in all those many worlds, imperial and otherwise, which Europe has frequently abutted on to in the past?

Eric Hobsbawm: You are quite right. I have generally been a bit sceptical about European unity. First of all because, historically speaking, though Europe has played an enormous role historically, particularly in the last five hundred years, it hasn't done so as a continent -- bits of it have but not others. Europe was a centre of imperialism and overseas empires; but there were certain parts of Europe which were not involved in this enterprise at all. Again, Europe existed so long as it was, as it were, the main centre of political and military power in the world, again roughly speaking from the sixteenth century until the twentieth century. But it existed as a great power system which sometimes worked. For instance, it worked rather well in the nineteenth century, indeed it worked well even in the twentieth century except for about 30 years between 1914 and 1947. But the idea of a union, a European union is a twentieth century development. First, after the First World War when Europe attempted to establish itself against two outside units, mainly America and Russia, we have the first proposal to unify Europe. After the Second World War, it very largely attempted to establish a group of west-European states -- a 'Europe' in the first instance against Russia.

This wasn't really the continent Europe, but a part of Europe, and it remained so. The original plan in the minds of the propagandists of the European idea was to work towards a federal state, or at least a state federation. For various reasons this did not happen, and it hasn't happened, and it isn't going to happen with one major exception. In effect two elements of a united Europe have developed: first of all, Europe as an economic unit; and incidentally Europe as an economic unit even in the days when Europe was essentially anti-Soviet, anti-Russian was also directed potentially against the United States. The other element which is not so often recognised is that Europe, though lacking the European constitution until right now, has developed a Supreme Court. And the European Supreme Court whose judgment is accepted as superior to local judgments, has produced a degree of legal unification, not only in respect of human rights but in other affairs which is genuine and very important. Except in these two respects, Europe doesn't exist. It is not an effective political unit, internationally speaking, and it is not an effective military unit. It is an effective economic unit because it represents the largest, one of the three major economic blocks in the world, and one which is comparable in size to the United States. The only way which the United States regards Europe really seriously is in trade negotiations. Here the United States negotiate as equals with Europe, whereas in every other respect they don't negotiate as equals.

Is this going to develop further? If there is any basis on which a European consciousness is likely to develop to some extent, it is an anti-American basis. But I don't believe that institutionally Europe is going to become that important, especially as it is actually losing what little unity it originally had. The original idea was surrounded by an enormous amount of rhetoric about European culture and European institutions; but in fact the extension of Europe, not only to large parts of what used to be the Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe but to actual parts of the Soviet Union itself has to a great extent diluted the idea of Europe. Take the proposal, for instance, which is put forward at present to accept Turkey into the European Union. Now in no sense can you say, historically speaking or in any other respect, is Turkey part of Europe. We have here a calculation of international politics, but not based on the traditional, cultural unity of Europe, or indeed on the economic unity of Europe. That was essentially the idea of getting together the developed parts of Europe which, collectively speaking, would form an international bloc of global importance. So that is my particular reason for being a little sceptical of the development of Europe.

I don't believe that the European constitution itself, whether or not it is accepted, is going to change very much. The European Union will remain what it originally was, mainly what De Gaulle called a "Europe of fatherlands", a coalition of states. At the moment it is no longer a Europe of states which see things in

the same way, because the ex-Soviet states see things very much more as client states of the United States than the original nucleus of Europe. The economic future of Europe is not clear, although it remains an area of great wealth. In some ways if you look at the economics of the globe today, there is a curious kind of symbiotic arrangement between the rising East Asian countries and the United States. Both to some extent need each other, though both are potential rivals; but Europe is somehow left out.

As for the future. It seems to be clear that the general situation in the late twentieth early twenty-first century is characterised by disorder rather than order, by uncertainty. I think since we are here in India and people who live in India and Asia are likely to be optimistic: partly because of the general age distribution of the populations; partly because it is actually true that the centre of gravity -- not only of the world economy but to some extent other human activities -- may be moving eastwards. To that extent it is much easier for Europeans to have a pessimistic view than it would be for the Indians and Chinese or Vietnamese. At the moment these may really look forward, whatever happens, to a more interesting and more important twenty-first century. Yet it seems to me that doubt is in order because of the extraordinary speed with which social change has taken place.

We can judge the technological consequences of that speed; but the human consequences, it seems to me, are likely to be far more profound. For millennia, in some ways, certain kinds of relationships have operated between human beings in real communities, (not states), and in family communities; but these are disappearing and they are not being replaced, as it were, by any equivalent guides. In the past you didn't need such guidance *because the past was to some extent the guide to what humans do*: how fathers behaved to sons, how mothers behaved to daughters, how brothers behaved to each other, how neighbours behaved to each other, all these things. And the speed at which this traditional fabric of human societies, can be seen to be disintegrating particularly in the West, is extraordinary; and this leaves the textures of human relationships very largely indeterminate. This is the cause for worry, and in some instances for alarm.

Let me put the thing brutally. Socially speaking, the major innovation of the twentieth century in the west has been the emancipation of women. Women occupy a position in public life which was never previously dreamed of. Yet one of the consequences of this emancipation in a country like Catholic Italy is that they stopped having children, they just don't have children anymore. In some respects people hailed birth control because they said the rate at which demographically the human race expands was such that it

can only be controlled by some kind of voluntary or other kind of birth control. It is quite an extraordinary situation where a country which was highly traditional in every respect -- it is still in many respects highly traditional in family structure -- one of the consequences is simply that women do not want to have children. This may not be a lasting effect, we don't know. We may find, as in England now, that women like to have children but they want to have them much later. Nevertheless you have problems: the average age of mothers is much older, the relationship of the mothers to the children is changed.

I am not judging this development. I am simply saying that here we have changes following from the extraordinary speed at which society has transformed -- whose consequences cannot yet be foreseen but may quite often be extraordinarily negative, at least for the time being. For those of us who are old enough and can remember the days when, as it were, the rules were much more accepted, this is a very worrying thing. I very much hope that over the next two or three generations the human race will discover a way of living together -- not only between different peoples but different states -- just plain living together in the way in which traditionally humans had been accustomed.