

# Eric Hobsbawm's dialectical materialism in the postwar period 1946-56

*Andrea Bonfanti*

**Abstract:** This article aims to demonstrate that Eric Hobsbawm was a dialectical materialist. It considers what dialectical materialism meant for him by analysing four prominent characteristics of Hobsbawm's Marxist study of history found in his writings between 1946 and 1956. That class-struggle analysis was the primary analytical lens for Hobsbawm is the major claim that this work challenges. Hobsbawm's thinking was guided by dialectical materialism, which was a scientific outlook based on analysis. It always accounted for unpredictable human agency and, though economic factors played the principal role in the development of history, this study rejects the claim that Hobsbawm was a mechanical determinist. Further, dialectical materialism aimed at fostering the socialist revolution, with its ultimate goal being to overcome struggle and reach unity.

**Keywords:** Eric Hobsbawm, Dialectical Materialism, Marxism, CPGB, British Marxist Historians

**E**ric Hobsbawm (1917-2012) was one of the most celebrated historians of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. His works have been translated into dozens of languages, most notably 'The Age of' volumes beginning with *The Age of Revolution*, and Hobsbawm's Marxist historical method influenced innumerable young researchers.<sup>1</sup> In his recent *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History* (2019),

Richard Evans has attempted to provide an intellectual scrutiny of the Marxist historian. The work is remarkable in several ways – the breadth of archival sources it gauges is impressive – but this lengthy book leaves the reader pondering what, in effect, history meant to Hobsbawm. As Evans points out, he ‘could never accept the fundamental premises of Communism’ which Hobsbawm upheld.<sup>2</sup> The political consideration seems to have spilled over into the historical field too, and Evans has applied his vision of and methodology for studying history to Hobsbawm’s approach. This, in turn, has caused his study to largely neglect what history meant to committed Marxists: that is, the fact that they used dialectical materialism to analyse it.

The issue is especially relevant for the interwar and early postwar periods, when the foundations were laid of what came to be known, however anachronistically and simplistically respectively, as the British Marxist historians and their class-struggle history. Indeed, the historiographically daunting task undertaken in this paper is to contest and, more than this, improve upon the long-held argument that class-struggle was the primary analytical lens for Hobsbawm. This is the view that Harvey Kaye put forward in his seminal study of the British Marxist historians.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, while Kaye’s research remains valid insofar as it highlights the Marxists’ political usage of history, the overarching argument that Hobsbawm attempted a class-struggle analysis of history is misleading, or at least partial. Class-struggle was only a fraction of the broader dialectical materialist method and Hobsbawm’s Marxist history, the object of the present work, requires to be reassessed.<sup>4</sup> This paper thus aims to remedy these partial, yet fundamental, deficiencies by studying the Marxist element in Hobsbawm’s published works, namely dialectical materialism. Its particular focus is on the postwar period.

More specifically, my argument here is that dialectical materialism was the driving force behind, or the analytical framework for, Eric Hobsbawm’s historical thinking in the years between 1946 and 1956. A cautionary remark about the term ‘dialectical materialism’ is due. This term has a long and complex history, was probably first

used by the German Marxist Joseph Dietzgen and subsequently by Plekhanov, Lenin and, later, Stalin.<sup>5</sup> It entered communists' parlance mostly after the October Revolution and the rise of Marxism-Leninism, though some form of orthodoxy, in Britain and elsewhere, came into being only with the publication of Stalin's *Short Course* in the late 1930s – on which more below.<sup>6</sup> What is of relevance here is that Hobsbawm, like most of his associates, was not too concerned with debates on or issues about dialectical materialism. Most of these were hair-splitting for those unfamiliar with them, and Hobsbawm was content to use the term in a relative loose manner, often as a synonym of others like 'Marxism' or the 'dialectic approach'. As Hobsbawm noted in his autobiography, *Interesting Times*:

What made Marxism so irresistible was its comprehensiveness. 'Dialectical materialism' provided, if not a 'theory of everything', then at least a 'framework of everything', linking inorganic and organic nature with human affairs, collective and individual, and providing a guide to the nature of all interactions in a world of constant flux.<sup>7</sup>

In short, what primarily interests us is not the extent to which some 'original', ideal or philosophically more-or-less sound dialectical materialism coincided or differed from Hobsbawm's in the postwar period. Rather, it is what dialectical materialism – with the terminological or philosophical approximations which were the norm back then and may thus be justified here – was for him and how he deployed it.

So, how can we qualify Hobsbawm's Marxist study of history in the postwar years? First, dialectical materialism was a scientific method that ought to be applied to study totalities. Second, it focused on analysis rather than narrative, asking 'why' in addition to 'what'. In other words, it paid attention to questions of causal relationship in historical explanation because it attempted to explain historical change rather than simply recounting the past. Third, Hobsbawm was not a mechanical determinist and, in fact, dialectical materialism

allowed him to include elements of (unpredictable) human agency in his analysis. Fourth, he used dialectical materialism to turn history into a weapon for the socialist revolution. It is appropriate to start our history with the intellectual milieu out of which Hobsbawm's historical project developed, and the first part of this paper looks at the development of Marxism in Britain in the interwar period. On this basis, the second part then analyses the most prominent features of Hobsbawm's dialectical materialism.

### **Dialectical materialism in Britain in the inter-war period**

1917 represented a watershed in history. Politically, the Bolshevik Revolution was for many an unmissable opportunity for the long-awaited international socialist revolution and, following the Russian example, communist parties mushroomed all over the globe. The Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) was set up in 1920 by several Marxist groups, the most important of which were the British Socialist Party, the Socialist Labour Party, the Workers' Socialist Federation and the South Wales Socialist Society. Coming from different theoretical backgrounds, though all attributable to some form of Marxism, they believed in the necessity of organising to contribute to world communism, the sight of which appeared, or perhaps was, within grasp in the late 1910s and early 1920s.

1917 represented an important moment for theoretical Marxism too. For the communists, Lenin's precepts modernised Marxist materialism and provided an efficient political doctrine for a socialist revolution – though many left-wing theoreticians grew steadily distant from the labouring masses.<sup>8</sup> Marxist-Leninists focused on the practical application of theories to the political realm and, in particular, to the seizure of power.<sup>9</sup> Within this political philosophy there was space for human freedom (humans were subject to necessary laws only as long as they were unaware of those laws, i.e. of Marxism), though Marxism-Leninism itself became or, rather, was

made, the new doctrine to follow for all members of communist parties. In Britain, this process was supported by the CPGB theoretician, the hard-liner Rajani Palme Dutt, who ensured that discussions on dialectical materialism shadowed the instructions from Moscow.<sup>10</sup>

Dialectical materialism was discussed in British communist circles in the interwar period, though after Lenin's death in 1924 the party line became increasingly dictated by Stalin. By the end of the decade, Stalinism had turned into quite an imposing reality which covered aspects of theoretical Marxism as much as political strategy.<sup>11</sup> For instance, the debate that took place in the Soviet Union between mechanists such as Nikolai Bukharin and dialecticians guided by Abram Deborin was cut short by Stalin and, in fact, never fully arrived to Britain.<sup>12</sup> What reached British shores was Stalin's conclusion of it, which arrived in 1931 through the words of Dmitry Mirsky. As the author explained in the *Labour Monthly*, the party journal edited by Dutt, dialectical materialism was the revolutionary philosophy of, and for, the proletariat. As Mirsky put it, 'revolutionary Marxist Dialectic' was the 'guide to action' for the proletariat.<sup>13</sup> Philosophical principles had to be combined with practical political (revolutionary) action, while both mechanical materialism and Deborin's idealist dialectic must be abandoned.<sup>14</sup> The mechanists could not explain the formation of dialectical results, i.e. what the 'new' element in a system was, while the Deborinites were mere idealistic and unpractical scholastics.<sup>15</sup>

This vision was well accepted in the CPGB circles, or perhaps just forced upon them. For example, together with his brother Rajani, Clemens Dutt wholeheartedly supported the Stalinist version of dialectical materialism, arguing that any other form of the doctrine was 'naïve' and 'materialist'.<sup>16</sup> He also stressed the importance for dialectical materialism of change and of the inter-connection of all phenomena. Social change, he added, ought not to be seen as an effect of technological change but of class-struggle. Other works that treated the topic included *Aspects of Dialectical Materialism* (1934), where several authors, not all fellow-travellers, published their views. One might for example mention the views expressed by J. D. Bernal,

a Cambridge-based communist scientist whose popularity started to be recognised from the late 1930s.<sup>17</sup> In his contribution, Bernal argued that any ‘attempts to separate dialectical materialism as a pure philosophy from revolutionary politics’ was sheer misunderstanding and misrepresentation.<sup>18</sup> He also explained that dialectical materialism had to be differentiated from mechanical materialism, that it was a science based on the analysis of continuities and of changes and transformations which brought about the new, and that, with reference to history, the ‘unpredictable individuality’ of men had to be accounted for.<sup>19</sup> As the 1930s came to a close, Stalin’s intervention in the discussion of dialectical materialism became, once more, the path to follow.

A fundamental exposition of dialectical materialism was the section of the *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolshevik) – Short Course* titled ‘Dialectical and Historical Materialism’. As Hobsbawm recalled on multiple occasions, this was known to come from Stalin and heavily influenced British communists with interests in the topic.<sup>20</sup> The ‘Short Course’ appeared in 1938 and explained in an easily accessible and systematic, yet simplistic, way what dialectical materialism was meant to be. Stalin’s contribution became the companion to the classic Marxist-Leninist texts on dialectical materialism such as Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* and Engels’s *Anti-Dühring* and *Dialectics of Nature*.<sup>21</sup> These works were at times fairly inaccessible to a wider public. Perhaps more importantly, they were less immediately relevant to the stalinist political imperatives of the late 1930s. It is worth adding that Hobsbawm confirmed having read Stalin’s exposition ‘with enthusiasm, allowing for its pedagogic simplifications’ and that it ‘corresponded pretty much to what I, and perhaps most of the British intellectual reds of the 1930s, understood by Marxism’.<sup>22</sup>

While a lengthy analysis of this seminal text would be inappropriate here, a number of points of relevance may be noted. In the first place, the Marxist dialectical method was described as having four characteristics that placed it in stark contrast with idealism or metaphysics: (a) the world with its phenomena was connected as a

whole; (b) phenomena were constantly changing and should be seen in continuous development; (c) quantitative change would lead to qualitative leaps; (d) contradictions existed in everything and their resolution (through struggle) caused development.<sup>23</sup> It was also explained that Marxism was the key to understanding, and thus explaining scientifically, historical development. This meant recognising the mode of production which was the 'chief force' determining the 'physiognomy of society'.<sup>24</sup> Within a given mode of production, the productive forces (instruments and people) and the relations of production were the two elements (of a unity) which could enter in a contradictory (out of tune) relationship, thus requiring resolution and a qualitative change for a higher form of social organisation. Change, it was added, started from the productive forces, particularly the instruments of production. The role of history was to apply these scientific laws of historical development, and that of the party to apply and use such knowledge to achieve a socialist world.

In addition to the *Short Course*, the works of the communist economist and Trinity College don Maurice Dobb also had a strong impact on Hobsbawm's thinking. Trinity was the 'focal point of student communism in Cambridge and in the whole of Britain', and Dobb, being one of its fellows, 'was in a position to be adviser, tutor, father-confessor, and friend to the young radicals', including Hobsbawm.<sup>25</sup> Of Dobb's numerous works, the two most relevant to Hobsbawm's views on dialectical materialism were *On Marxism To-Day* (1932) and *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (1946).

The first, which Hobsbawm certainly read in his formative years, dealt explicitly with dialectical materialism.<sup>26</sup> Three points from Dobb's text are of particular importance. The first is that history must be viewed as a unity or, as Dobb put it: the "reality" of history [...] can only mean the totality of history itself.<sup>27</sup> This theme later reappeared in the *Studies*, where Dobb repeated that history was a matter of 'discovering from a study of its growth how a total situation is really constructed'.<sup>28</sup> The second point was an attack on the strictly mechanist view of history since this could not explain the appearance

of something that was qualitatively new in a system or totality. This was the advantage of dialectical materialism over mechanist materialism, even though both stressed that history had to be analysed ‘in terms of material *events* [italics added]’ and differed in that from idealism.<sup>29</sup> The past was constituted by real, material events which could be known, and therefore analysed, by the historian. Revolution was an ‘act of historical creation’ with man being an active agent in it.<sup>30</sup> It played a dialectical role in a system since it brought about the qualitatively new, i.e. what was required for essential change.

The third point to note in the present context was the political relevance of history. Dobb maintained that history alone was dead unless it was combined, as the Marxist method taught, with contemporary politics.<sup>31</sup> Together with the supposition that men were active agents in history, this point strengthened the idea that man enjoyed some degrees of freedom – so it can be said that Dobb’s system was not mechanist. Indeed, Dutt’s disciple Hugo Rathbone criticised fiercely Dobb’s work because, in his view, it tended to confuse idealism with materialism and did not aim sufficiently at fostering class struggle.<sup>32</sup> These were imperative elements of the political strategy that Stalin wanted implemented in all communist parties.

Although the *Studies* was published shortly after the end of the Second World War, Dobb’s *magnum opus* deserves attention here because of its stress on explanation and its influence on Hobsbawm. The *Studies* was an exceptional work in Marxist analysis, and an extraordinarily innovative work of historical enquiry, in that it aimed to explain why and how history developed rather than simply narrate the past. Explaining historical development meant understanding changes of the social relations to the means of production, with a central focus on English capitalism that meant that the work had a strong historical (empirical) connotation.<sup>33</sup> Dobb explained his ‘obstinate belief that economic analysis only makes sense and can only bear fruit if it is joined to a study of historical development’.<sup>34</sup> Bill Schwarz has been quite categorical, and rightly so, in arguing for the primacy of historical explanation in Dobb’s *Studies*. As Schwarz



explained, 'there is no doubting that the drive of the argument is directed towards the moment of explanation, and this is the major theoretical justification embodied in the *Studies*'.<sup>35</sup>

What especially influenced Hobsbawm was that the *Studies* analysed the general causes of social change, i.e. economic factors. Hobsbawm considered it an outstanding piece of Marxist analysis, presenting an accurate, scientific understanding of the causes of change and, in particular, of capitalist development. As he afterwards recalled, the work had provided him with his analytical framework in that it 'embodied the findings of post-Marx economic history in a Marxist analysis'.<sup>36</sup>

As we shall see, there was some ambivalence in Hobsbawm's usage of terms within the sphere of Marxist economics. This probably derived from the fact that Hobsbawm was not a trained economist, nor primarily concerned with the theoretical soundness of the relationship between the elements of a mode of production.<sup>37</sup> It seems plausible to argue that the influence that Dobb had on him in respect of economics was mostly visible in the emphasis on the element of production – something which, particularly with regard to the relations of production, Dobb might have overly stressed.<sup>38</sup> This also worked well with the approximate structure sketched in the *Short Course*, which, as Hobsbawm admitted, allowed 'pedagogic simplifications'.<sup>39</sup> In fact, the element of production as an analytical tool to describe and explain society was also the focal point for others around Hobsbawm and Dobb at this time. Dobb's close colleague Piero Sraffa – the Italian economist in contact with Antonio Gramsci, and who probably influenced Ludwig Wittgenstein's view of meaning – was also working to 'express social relations with a focus on the production side'.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the greatness of these intellectuals – including Gramsci and Wittgenstein here – lies maybe in their ability to expand the barriers of their analytical thinking to allow for a more comprehensive understanding, i.e. description and explanation, of society, be it from the specific fields of economics, history, language and more.

## Hobsbawm's dialectical materialism in the postwar years

For many, like Dobb, dialectical materialism was a method of analysing historical development that did not imply a mechanical determinist approach to the study of social change. Turning now to Hobsbawm, we can establish that he was a dialectical materialist by analysing four prominent aspects of the dialectics that drove his thinking in the decade or so following the Second World War. For Hobsbawm, dialectical materialism was a science of totality. It sought to analyse rather than narrate history in order to provide a realistic theory for historical explanation. This did not make Hobsbawm a determinist and we shall see that he always accounted for 'unpredictability' in history.

The first aspect of dialectical materialism driving Hobsbawm's thinking in this period was its scientific character. As John Foster has argued, Hobsbawm strongly believed that the dialectical materialist approach to the study of history could achieve through analysis objective truths about the past, should focus on society as a whole and ought to bring about social change.<sup>41</sup> Hobsbawm expressed this particularly well in an review-article entitled 'The Hero in History' (1947). In it he explained that Marxist historians were scientists and that dialectical materialism 'has always sought to discover the laws of historical development, believing that history is a science, capable of enabling us to make predictions'.<sup>42</sup> Events, rather as Dobb had argued, composed the past and could be known by the scientist-historian, who would use that knowledge to gain insights into the future.

Hobsbawm further added that, 'as scientists', historians' attention must be 'directed primarily to the discovery of regularities and laws'(p186). These 'laws of historical development' were not clearly defined, though they most likely reflected the Marxist conception that history progressed through stages, each beginning and ending with essential changes in the mode of production occurring through revolutionary moments. Hobsbawm also noted that historians ought to be aware of 'general causes', 'special causes' and 'individual causes'

of change (p187). General causes probably meant the development of the productive forces, rather as in the *Short Course*, and on these general causes the other two types of causes rested. Special causes were historical situations (for example a form of political organisation) which changed over time and were therefore contingent. Individual causes reflected individuality and could not be predicted, though their power to generate change was minimal – as also maintained in Christopher Hill's *Lenin and the Russian Revolution* (1947). As previously noted, Hobsbawm's interest was the historical understanding of society, and it is therefore no surprise that there was some vagueness over the primacy of the productive forces (as the *Short Course* had it) or the relations of production (as Dobb had stressed). In short, though he often spoke of productive forces, that the broadly defined economic basis influenced the superstructure seemed sufficient to Hobsbawm as Marxist historian.

The scientific character of dialectical materialism meant that history with all its elements (events) ought to be studied as a totality. These elements were in causal relations with each other, with the status of productive forces being the primary – though not exclusive – cause of change for other phenomena, for example the forms of social organisation. Hobsbawm made the point in an article on the importance of Marxism for the social sciences where he explained that the 'dialectical method [...] has meant chiefly an insistence on the historical character of *all* [italics added] phenomena'.<sup>43</sup> All historical phenomena, in other words, were connected and could (and should) be studied as one totality. Dialectical materialism was a 'coherent system of thought, whose elements are interdependent' and the laws of historical explanation needed confirmation through empirical research in the totality of history.<sup>44</sup> That Hobsbawm believed that history ought to be studied as a totality is also suggested by the variety of his output, which from early in his career covered an enormous range of topics as well as geographical areas, spanning from European economic history to political theory in America, and transnational social movements as the mafia.

Harvey Kaye has argued that Hobsbawm's studies between the 1940s and 1960s 'are characterised by a concern for the "totality" of working-class experience'. He further added that working-class struggles and movements 'have been significant to the *totality* of historical development'.<sup>45</sup> Kaye's statements appear to suggest that Hobsbawm focused on the working class alone, and in view of his wide-ranging output this would be misleading. It is nonetheless appropriate to see Hobsbawm's work on the working class as a way to build up empirical knowledge for an understanding of history as a whole, i.e. of the laws of historical development. Before moving to the second aspect of dialectical materialism, two further reasons may be mentioned that confirm Hobsbawm's commitment to studying history on a total scale. First, capitalism was known to be a universal phenomenon that bypassed national barriers, habits and traditions and to study it on a global scale appeared the most appropriate, if not the only, way to do it.<sup>46</sup> The second reason has to do with the contingent historical situation of the post-Second World War years. That conflict had been truly global and its fate determined by a network of battles fought on different continents. So, as Michael Bentley has shown, the mindset that most people developed, or at least grew accustomed to, was framed on a global scale and a spatial framework of analysis that remained with them after the conflict had ended.<sup>47</sup>

The second aspect of dialectical materialism that drove Hobsbawm's thinking was its focus on analysis rather than narrative. This meant that Hobsbawm's concern with regard to historical enquiry lay in asking 'why something occurred' more than 'what occurred' – a critical point which Evans seems to have appreciated only tangentially.<sup>48</sup> In the study of history, dialectical materialism was important and different from other approaches because it allowed historians to explain 'why and how societies change and transform themselves: in other words, the facts of social evolution'.<sup>49</sup> To attempt the mere description of the past was a common practice amongst historians on the Rankean tradition, and the Marxist approach to historical explanation, which began to gain acceptance in the 1930s, was revolu-

tionary.<sup>50</sup> As Hobsbawm explained in the late 1950s whilst analysing political parties' structures in Britain, the 'real problem is not to show *that* these things are so ... but *why* the coming of mass politics and a mass political labour movement has not led to greater changes'.<sup>51</sup>

Some interesting implications about the relation between analysis and change in historical explanation is yielded by the following passage from Hobsbawm's 1952 article on 'The Political Theory of Auschwitz':

In theory, therefore, it seems quite possible for a minority, willing to use terror without restraint, and multiplying its force by the monopoly of certain resources of coercion, to establish its rule over a majority, maintain it, and create in the end a stable order of sorts. The case of absolutely pure coercion is of course artificial and – except for the Nazi camps – unreal. So is the assumption that the slave-state is self-contained and undisturbed by internal or external changes. This degree of abstraction does not matter since we are analysing a general problem.<sup>52</sup>

As the concluding sentence shows, 'abstraction' for Hobsbawm was a static system since in reality everything was subject to change. This was the common view amongst Marxists and Bernal had also stated in 1934 that 'static systems are mere abstractions'.<sup>53</sup> Analysis was the explanation of change within a realist system – it enabled the achievement of a realist theory for historical explanation. It aimed to render intelligible the relation of historical causation between facts that had occurred before and after a certain change took place. This was not necessary in a theoretical, static system because changes would not necessarily occur in it – and within such a system not analysis, but only narrative, was conceivable.

The term 'general problem' deserves also attention because it strengthens the case that analysis provided a realist theory for historical explanation. Hobsbawm downplayed the necessity of high abstraction in his article because he was analysing a realist, not

theoretical, model. More specifically, he was analysing the general problem, or general causes, within it. As stated above, a 'general cause' was the term used to represent change in the development of productive forces, on which special and individual causes rested. Similarly, a 'general problem' referred to a change in productive forces which occurred in reality – in this case, the change from a capitalist state with its revolutionary and salaried proletariat to a Nazi lager, where labour-force was completely coerced (thus socially static) with no possibility of a successful uprising. The article studied real events and therefore analysis was required, while theoretical abstraction was irrelevant. The point is finally confirmed by another article where Hobsbawm explained the difference between economics and mathematics. Economics was an 'applied subject', with mathematics serving as its 'pure theory' but which could not hope to 'solve practical problems in society'. Rather, as the 'economist is *not* a pure mathematician' he was 'primarily concerned with realistic postulates' – alas, a lesson that orthodox economists have long forgotten.<sup>54</sup>

The fact that Hobsbawm distinguished analysis from narrative did not mean that the latter was worthless but simply that it was, if considered alone, insufficient to provide historical explanation. Narrative was the basis of the historical past or, as Marc Bloch put it, 'the very plasma in which events are immersed'.<sup>55</sup> Analysis was the process of selection of events and explanation of causal relations (what caused change, why it came about) between them: how one influenced another. The view that one 'must first know what the material world is before trying to explain it' might have been generated or inspired by Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* and was rather widespread amongst communist historians, both in Britain and elsewhere.<sup>56</sup> For example, the Italian Emilio Sereni clearly shared this view when compiling the introduction to his *Il capitalismo nelle campagne* (Capitalism in the Countryside), where he explained that the 'Marxist-Leninist method ... requires these preparatory studies' consisting of gathering a 'collection of historical facts' before they could be organised in a 'modern scientific manner, [through] the Marxist-Leninist method'.<sup>57</sup>

Two articles which Hobsbawm published on the seventeenth century in 1954 exemplify the relationship between narrative and analysis.<sup>58</sup> The first article can be said to offer a narrative of events that occurred in seventeenth-century Europe and described the economic crisis that provided the basis for the development of capitalism in that century. Though the article also delivered an initial explanation of the crisis, its main goal was to 'marshal some of the evidence for the existence of a general crisis'.<sup>59</sup> In other words, the article aimed to provide the descriptive basis on which later analysis was to be had. The second article was analytical and explained 'the changes it [the crisis] produced', the most important of which was the English Revolution.<sup>60</sup> It did not focus on what happened but on the relationship between a general cause and its outcomes. Analysis aimed to explain the state of things after an essential, economic change had occurred, i.e. those of which the English Revolution was to be seen as the outcome.<sup>61</sup> One final example should suffice to demonstrate the primacy for Hobsbawm of the dialectical materialist principle of analysis in the field of history. In a book review in 1949 he wrote:

What we want to know about shipwrights or shoemakers is not the fact that they appear occasionally in the Home Office Papers, but why the local gentlemen's agreements broke down when they did.<sup>62</sup>

Everybody could discover facts, but only the Marxist lens of analysis could reach an understanding of the (non-mechanist) laws of historical explanation.

Belief in these laws did not, however, make Hobsbawm a strict or mechanical determinist who adhered to a one-way base-superstructure view of the world. Though he has often been presented in this way, the third aspect of the dialectical materialism that drove his thinking demonstrates the contrary. For Dennis Dworkin, Marxist historians prior to 1956 adhered primarily to one of two theories of historical explanation. Championed respectively by Hobsbawm and E. P.

Thompson, the first was determinist and focused on economic structures, while the second emphasised class struggle and the importance of culture, ideas and human agency.<sup>63</sup> This is misleading as Hobsbawm, since the beginning of his career, had criticised mechanistic determinism throughout his writings. As he put it quite boldly in 1947, 'Marxism is neither mechanist nor fatalist and takes full account of the importance of "accidental" factors'.<sup>64</sup> Hobsbawm showed the clear intention of distinguishing materialism from mechanical determinism in another article from 1947 focusing on the socialist Bernard Shaw. Rebuking Shaw for having 'abandoned his admiration for historical materialism', Hobsbawm stressed that he had in fact confused it with 'mechanistic' or 'mechanical' determinism'. Referring to 'historical materialism (or rather the mechanical determinism which he identified with it)', Hobsbawm made use of brackets as rhetorical tools with the express intent of demonstrating the primary importance of distinguishing between determinism and materialism and avoid ambiguities between the two philosophical outlooks.<sup>65</sup>

It would be inappropriate to trace a neat line of division between determinism and non-determinism and a more nuanced understanding of Hobsbawm's thinking ought to be attempted. The grain that tips the balance and distinguishes Marxism from mechanical determinism was the dialectical element of 'unpredictability'. We have already seen how Bernal accounted for the 'unpredictable individuality' of men and that Mirsky criticised the mechanists because they could not explain the 'new' element within a system. The British communist philosopher Maurice Cornforth also discriminated between mechanistic determinism and dialectical materialism, the difference lying in the constant state of change of moving matter. As Cornforth put it, the 'inner impulses to development contained within things themselves' allowed the dialecticians (somewhat creakingly, perhaps) to avoid relying on some *deus ex machina* and turning to a supreme being as the ultimate cause of change.<sup>66</sup>

Hobsbawm followed a similar train of thinking to that of the older generation of Marxists, arguing that Sidney Hook had 'reduce[d]



Marxism from a dialectical method which finds no difficulty in combining precise laws of social development with quite a wide scope for the “unpredictable” factors to something like mechanist determinism’.<sup>67</sup> To understand the function of these ‘unpredictable factors’ and what their designation as such further demonstrates that Hobsbawm was not a determinist.

There seems to have been two different positions regarding the function of ‘unpredictable factors’. First, Hobsbawm could have equated these factors with the dialectical element of the ‘new’ or what would be introduced into a system after a dialectical change had occurred. Because the dialectical element was new, no prior empirical evidence could be obtained for it and this was what made it unpredictable. The second and more plausible position did not identify the unpredictable factors with the ‘new’ or dialectical element within a system but with the elements of the process which led to change. In other words, the function of these factors was to help in bringing about the dialectical ‘new’ rather than representing it themselves. In his article on Hook, Hobsbawm wrote of the impact that ‘accidents’ and ‘fortuity’ could have in historical development, stating that ‘they are merely things which cannot be directly predicted from our knowledge of the laws of history and of a given situation’. He added that the ‘Marxists are far from denying the importance of “fortuity,” let alone its existence’.<sup>68</sup>

This second view thus enabled Hobsbawm to allow within his philosophical system the unpredictable factor of human agency which could influence the course of history. This unpredictable factor fell under the label of ‘individual causes’ of historical development that were secondary to economic motifs. As Hobsbawm explained in 1955, Joseph Schumpeter’s work had a ‘fundamental flaw’ in that it was ‘concerned exclusively with “analysis”, and deliberately omits (except for purposes of background information) ... “thought”’.<sup>69</sup> In this case, ‘analysis’ meant the study of economic factors within a social system and Schumpeter was criticised for not considering ideas. Similarly, whilst explaining the relevance of fortuitous factors

in historical development, Hobsbawm included the ‘importance of “great men,”’ the ‘exercise of good leadership’ and ‘political initiative’ – very probably with Lenin in mind.<sup>70</sup> Hobsbawm considered that people’s thoughts and individual qualities influenced the course of history and should be accounted for when analysing social change. However, they could not be predicted through laws and there was ‘no simple formula’ to ‘describe the dialectical character of such changes.’<sup>71</sup> Dan LeMahieu has argued that Hobsbawm’s Marxist works in this period always ‘chronicled the intersection between one individual and the larger dialectical forces of history’, and the accuracy of this contention is clearly evident.<sup>72</sup>

Before moving to the fourth, and last, aspect of Hobsbawm’s dialectical materialism, it is worth looking more closely at Hobsbawm’s view of the relationship between ideas and matter. It has often been claimed that Marxists did not consider ideas as influential elements in the development of history but believed instead that the economic base determined ideas, which could then be predicted by the laws of historical explanation.<sup>73</sup> In reality, Hobsbawm and the Marxists believed that ideas could influence the course of history, though their impact would be secondary to that of other causes. As the *Short Course* indicated, ‘[n]ew social ideas and theories ... become a most potent force which facilitates the carrying out of the new tasks’ and that it was precisely in these social tasks that ‘the tremendous organising, mobilising and transforming value of new ideas, new theories, new political views and new political institutions manifests itself.’<sup>74</sup> Ideas could never be studied *a priori* and this further helped Hobsbawm to legitimise human agency in historical analysis. Describing the socialist couple Beatrice and Sidney Webb, for example, Hobsbawm explained that the tendency to point out how little social policy and political practice derived from their ideas and combative personalities was ‘based on a misconception.’<sup>75</sup> The same point was stressed in a later article in which Hobsbawm re-stated that it was the Webbs’ ideas, more than their actual politics, that had great influence in society.<sup>76</sup>

What Hobsbawm rejected was the view that ideas could and should be studied in isolation from the rest of the world. Thus he accused the liberal historian Jacob Talmon of having studied the early democrats as though 'they lived in a world of abstract ideas and abstract psychological urges'.<sup>77</sup> There always was a relationship between the concrete world and people's ideas, and though the economic basis might be more influential than personal causes, these too could impact the course of history. One had therefore to analyse people's lives remembering that they were 'men trying to answer concrete political questions from the point of view of people in particular social situations and historical periods'.<sup>78</sup> And the answers that they formulated in their minds could have a real impact in the concrete world.

For Hobsbawm, the study of history ought itself to have such an impact, as a weapon in the struggle for the socialist revolution. This was the fourth aspect of Hobsbawm's understanding of dialectical materialism as the method by which study of history actively fostered class struggle as outlined in the following passage:

Thus few of them [Marxists] will agree that the 'transformation of quantity into quality' and the 'struggle of opposites' are 'minor aspects of the Marxian philosophy'. Neither Lenin nor Stalin would agree. There is a danger that the insistence on the simple phenomena of change and interaction, without further analysis, will reduce dialectical materialism to a harmless methodology whose main practical point is to warn the student of the social sciences against undue sectionalism. A welcome warning, but not the Marxist philosophy.<sup>79</sup>

In other words, the philosophy of dialectical materialism did not simply account for 'interactions' between different parts of a system. These interactions had a specific character in that they were in constant and necessary opposition (contradiction) with each other – at least within certain societies, such as capitalist society. The danger that arose from considering merely general interactions was

that dialectical materialism was turned into a sterile ‘methodology’ which would not foster struggle. In social terms, the struggle to which Hobsbawm referred was class struggle. Kaye’s argument that the British Marxist historians never studied one class in isolation but always historically, involving their inter-relations and confrontations, therefore makes good sense.<sup>80</sup>

Less persuasive is Kaye’s argument that the British Marxist historians developed a ‘theory of class determination’ on the lines of Dobb’s *Studies*.<sup>81</sup> Dobb’s theoretical standpoint with regard to class, as Kaye understood it, implied that all societies, past, present and future, were necessarily divided into classes and that history could only be studied through the lens of class struggle.<sup>82</sup> But in fact, in the few lines of the *Studies* quoted by Kaye, Dobb’s analytical framework was not that of class or class struggle but of unitary dialectical materialism, as can be gauged within the broader context of Dobb’s exposition. In this, Dobb wrote using dialectical materialist terms, referring for example to the ‘revolutionary transitions in which a qualitative change of a system occurs’, ‘quality in historical situation’, ‘conflict and interaction of its leading elements’, ‘major transformations’ in society, and the ‘appearance of novel composition’.<sup>83</sup> Only after Dobb had discussed historical development in such terms, did he speak of class. In addition to this, in the passage that Kaye quoted Dobb did not refer to just any society but to a specific ‘economic society’ whose features were ‘fundamental to our conception of Capitalism as a *distinctive* economic order, characteristic of a *distinctive* period of history’ (emphasis added).<sup>84</sup> It was this distinctive historical period which was one of class societies and class determination, and not history as a whole. Like such classic works of Marxism as *The Communist Manifesto*, the *Studies* took an organic view that transcended the current historical situation, based on class struggle and capitalism, and foresaw the advent of a classless, communist society.<sup>85</sup>

That all history needed to be based on class-struggle stimulates further reflection on the ultimate goal of dialectical materialism – though this reflection must remain here at an embryonic level. It

might be argued that dialectical materialism was, in the last instance, not about struggle but about overcoming it. In Marx's theory and subsequently for many communists, class struggle was only temporary because communism would bring about a classless, thus struggle-less, society. The last social transformation that dialectical materialism envisaged was that from capitalism into socialism, then communism. This ultimately unitarian view was possibly strengthened by the fact that for Lenin, whom Marxists of Hobsbawm's generation mostly looked to, the core of the dialectic was the Hegelian-inspired law of the unity of opposites.<sup>86</sup> One did not need to read Lenin's more philosophy-based works to appreciate the point that dialectical materialism aimed at a unitarian communist world. This was also expressed clearly, in my opinion in its simplest terms, in *The State and Revolution*, which was also one of Lenin's most popular texts during Hobsbawm's formative years.<sup>87</sup> As Lenin argued, to 'limit Marxism to the teaching of the class struggle means to curtail Marxism ... A Marxist is one who *extends* the acceptance of class struggle to the acceptance of the *dictatorship of the proletariat*'.<sup>88</sup> From the proletarian dictatorship onwards, the qualitatively new, socialist society would evolve, eventually, into communism. That Hobsbawm followed a similar unitary view has already been demonstrated. That he recalled that Lenin's works were, with those of Marx and Engels, those 'on which we based our attempts at a materialist interpretation of history' further demonstrates the point.<sup>89</sup> What can be said with certainty is that for Hobsbawm dialectical materialism was a realist theory which must have a social impact.

The relationship between a 'harmless methodology' and Marxist philosophy sheds an important light on the meaning that the realist theory of Marxism held for Hobsbawm. As already noted, dialectical materialism was opposed to any methodology, normally labelled metaphysics or idealist, which had or claimed to have little or no social impact. To borrow Cornforth's sharp way of putting it, dialectical materialism 'made philosophy into a revolutionary weapon of the working people, an instrument, a method for under-

standing the world so as to change it'.<sup>90</sup> A realist theory, then, was for Hobsbawm not only a theory that reflected objective truths but also one that had a real impact on society. In a way similar to Marxist economists like Dobb, historians armed with dialectical materialism were to provide practical solutions to the problems of society since if Marxism did 'not produce political recipes in the widest sense, it fails in its purpose'.<sup>91</sup> The point was reiterated several years later, when Hobsbawm famously wrote that the social sciences, including history obviously, 'are essentially "applied sciences" designed, to use Marx's phrase, to change the world and not merely to interpret it (or alternatively to explain why it does not need changing)'.<sup>92</sup> This social purpose, together with other characteristics of Marxism, inspired Hobsbawm and many of his colleagues, and help to explain why he in turn remains such an enormous source of inspiration.

## Conclusion

Eric Hobsbawm belonged to a generation of Marxists for many of whom dialectical materialism was a precise science that could narrate and explain development and changes of society. It was a practical weapon for the social struggles of the masses, though ultimately its goal was (communist) social unity. The assertion that Hobsbawm championed strict determinism was unfounded and, on the contrary, dialectical materialism retained that element of unpredictability without which it would have become a sheer mechanistic view.<sup>93</sup> Hobsbawm's historical production, in the end, reflected that power of attraction that Marxism had and which probably found its worthy foundations in the creative process of emancipation of and freedom for the masses of the people. Like many other great inventions, Marxism provided a timely way to understand society and to create space for struggle and liberation.<sup>94</sup>

There remain many questions on Hobsbawm and his epoch which merit our serious attention. One involves the scrutiny of dialectical

materialism and re-assessment of its significance for Marxist historiography across the broad and trans-national spectrum of world communism, particularly before (and through) those moments in 1956 which, to use Hobsbawm's words, seem to have 'destroyed it'.<sup>95</sup> That the Stalinised version of a radiant future became the emperor with no clothes and turned itself into its eventual demise seems indeed to prove correct one of Marx's key points: *everything changes*. Hobsbawm demonstrated, perhaps epitomised, how history can be a great tool to protest against the outdated and imagine (and bring about) the new – that society can be changed. Indeed, many of the values that his Marxist history inspired and nurtured across the globe have continued in different forms and at different times to kindle millions of people's minds.

## Notes

- 1 Anna Di Qual, *Eric J. Hobsbawm tra Marxismo britannico e comunismo italiano*, Venice, 2020, pp11-14.
- 2 Richard Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*, London, 2019, px.
- 3 Harvey Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians: An Introductory Analysis*, Basingstoke, 1995, see introduction and pp131-45.
- 4 That Marxism is a method (rather than, say, a theory) is of course a debated issue, mostly in philosophically-prone circles. For some clarification on the matter see, Gregor McLennan, 'Philosophy and history: some issues in recent marxist stheory' in Richard Johnson et al. (eds), *Making Histories: Studies in History-Writing and Politics*, Abingdon, 2007, pp139-41. Hobsbawm was not much troubled about the issue of terminology, at least for the period under consideration
- 5 Kaan Kangal, *Friedrich Engels and the Dialectics of Nature*, Cham, 2020, pp73-4 n5.
- 6 Guy Planty-Bonjour, *The Categories of Dialectical Materialism. Contemporary Soviet Ontology*, (trans.) T. J. Blakeley, Dordrecht, 1967, p8.
- 7 Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life*, London, 2002, p97.

- 8 Stuart Macintyre, *A Proletarian Science: Marxism in Britain, 1917-1933*, Cambridge, 1980, pp108-14.
- 9 Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, London, Verso, 1989), pp10-12.
- 10 John Callaghan, *Rajani Palme Dutt: A Study in British Stalinism*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1993), pp21-30.
- 11 Andrew Thorpe, 'Stalinism and British Politics', *History* 83, 1998, p612.
- 12 Macintyre, *A Proletarian Science*, pp142-4.
- 13 Dmitry Mirsky, 'The Philosophical Discussion in the CPSU. in 1930-31', *Labour Monthly* 13, 1931, 652.
- 14 Kangal, *Friedrich Engels*, pp60-7.
- 15 Mirsky, 'Philosophical', p652-3.
- 16 Clemens Dutt, 'Review article: The Philosophy of a Natural Scientist. *Philosophy for a Modern Man*, by H. Levy', *The Labour Monthly* 20, 1938, p256.
- 17 Gary Werskey, *The Visible College: The Collective Biography of British Scientific Socialists of the 1930s*, New York, NY: Holt, 1979, p149.
- 18 John Bernal, 'Dialectical Materialism' in et al., *Aspects of Dialectical Materialism*, London, 1934, pp89-90.
- 19 Bernal, 'Dialectical Materialism', p118.
- 20 Eric Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World: Reflections on Marx and Marxism*, New Haven, 2011, pp193-4.
- 21 Werskey, *The Visible College*, p180. See also, Paul Piccone, 'Gramsci's Marxism: Beyond Lenin and Togliatti', *Theory and Society* 3, 1976, p504.
- 22 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p96.
- 23 Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolshevik), *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolshevik) - Short Course*, Moscow, 1945, pp106-9.
- 24 CC of the CPSU(B), *Short Course*, p119.
- 25 Neal Wood, *Communism and British Intellectuals*, London, 1959, p96.
- 26 Timothy Shenk, *Maurice Dobb: Political Economist*, Basingstoke, 2013, p71.
- 27 Maurice Dobb, *On Marxism To-Day*, London, 1932, p20.
- 28 Maurice Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*, London, 1946, viii.
- 29 Dobb, *On Marxism*, p14. Unless stated otherwise, all italics in the article are present in the original text.



- 30 Dobb, *On Marxism*, p18.
- 31 Dobb, *On Marxism*, p22.
- 32 Macintyre, *Proletarian Science*, p121.
- 33 Shenk, *Maurice Dobb*, p100.
- 34 Dobb, *Studies*, vii.
- 35 Bill Schwarz, "'The People" in History: the Communist Party Historians' Group, 1946-56' in Johnson *Making Histories*, p49.
- 36 Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Historians' Group of the Communist Party' in Maurice Cornforth (ed.), *Rebels and Their Causes: Essays in Honour of A. L. Morton*, London, 1978, p38.
- 37 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, pp97-8. See also, Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm*, pp242.
- 38 Simon Clarke, 'Socialist Humanism and the Critique of Economism', *History Workshop* 8, 1979, 140.
- 39 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p96.
- 40 Amartya Sen, 'Sraffa, Wittgenstein, and Gramsci', *Journal of Economic Literature* 41, 2003, 1249.
- 41 John Foster, 'Eric Hobsbawm, Marxism and Social History', *Social History* 39, 2014, p167.
- 42 Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Hero in History', *The Modern Quarterly* 2, 1947, 185. (A comment on Sidney Hook, *The Hero in History*.)
- 43 Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Future of Marxism in the Social Sciences', *Universities and Left Review* 1, 1957, p29.
- 44 Hobsbawm, 'Future of Marxism', p29.
- 45 Kaye, *British Marxist Historians*, pp138-9, 229.
- 46 Enrico Menduni, 'Fra storia sociale e storia della società. Eric Hobsbawm', *Studi Storici* 14, 1973, p681.
- 47 Michael Bentley, *Modern Historiography: An Introduction*, London, 1999, p128.
- 48 Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm*, pp241-50.
- 49 Eric Hobsbawm, *On History*, London, 1997, p196.
- 50 John Warren, 'The Rankean Tradition in British Historiography, 1840-1950' in Stefan Berger et al. (eds), *Writing History: Theory and Practice*, New York, 2003, pp23-4.
- 51 Eric Hobsbawm, 'Twentieth-Century British Politics', *Past and Present* 11, 1957, pp101-2.
- 52 Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Political Theory of Auschwitz', *The Cambridge Journal* 5, 1952, p457.

- 53 Bernal, 'Dialectical Materialism', 104.
- 54 Eric Hobsbawm, review of *Schumpeter: Social Scientist* by E. Harris and *A History of Economic Analysis* by J. Schumpeter, *Science & Society* 19, 1955, pp73-4.
- 55 Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, (trans.) Peter Putnam, Manchester, 1954, p27.
- 56 Planty-Bonjour, *The Categories of Dialectical Materialism*, p9.
- 57 Emilio Sereni, *Il capitalismo nelle campagne (1860-1900)* Turin, 1947, p12.
- 58 Eric Hobsbawm, 'The General Crisis of the European Economy in the 17th Century', *Past and Present* 5, 1954, pp33-53 [henceforth, 'Crisis, I']; Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Crisis of the 17th Century – II', *Past and Present* 6, 1954, pp44-65 [henceforth, 'Crisis, II']. The articles were part of a longer controversy on the nature of the seventeenth century. For more details on the controversy see, Adam Sisman, *Hugh Trevor-Roper: The Biography*, London, 2010, pp187-93.
- 59 Hobsbawm, 'Crisis, I', p33.
- 60 Hobsbawm, 'Crisis, I', p33.
- 61 Hobsbawm, 'Crisis, II', p44.
- 62 Hobsbawm, review of A. Aspinall (ed.), *The Early English Trade Unions* in *The Economic Journal* 59, 1949, p408.
- 63 Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies*, Durham NC, 1997, p27.
- 64 Hobsbawm, 'Hero', p185.
- 65 Eric Hobsbawm, 'Bernard Shaw's Socialism', *Science & Society* 11, 1947, pp308-9, 318; also Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain*, Oxford, 2006, pp.28-32.
- 66 Maurice Cornforth, *Materialism and the Dialectical Method*, New York, 1968 [1953] edn, pp40-7.
- 67 Hobsbawm, 'Hero', p186.
- 68 Hobsbawm, 'Hero', p186.
- 69 Hobsbawm, review of *Schumpeter*, p73.
- 70 Hobsbawm, 'Hero', p188.
- 71 Eric Hobsbawm, 'Trends in the British Labor Movement since 1850', *Science & Society* 13, 1949, p304.
- 72 Dan LeMahieu, "'Scholarship Boys" in Twilight: The Memoirs of Six Humanists in Post-Industrial Britain', *Journal of British Studies* 53, 2014, p1020.

- 73 Macintyre, *Proletarian Science*, pp121-2.
- 74 CC of the CPSU(B), *Short Course*, pp116-17.
- 75 Hobsbawm, review of *Our Partnership* by Beatrice Webb in *English Historical Review* 64, 1949, p259.
- 76 Eric Hobsbawm, review of *Beatrice Webb: Diaries, 1912-1924*, by M. Cole (ed.), *English Historical Review* 68, 1953, p294.
- 77 Eric Hobsbawm, 'Who is for Democracy?', *The Modern Quarterly* 8, 1953, p101.
- 78 Hobsbawm, 'Who is for Democracy?', p101.
- 79 Eric Hobsbawm, review of *Socialism* by Paul Sweezy, *Science & Society* 14 (1949-50), p78.
- 80 Kaye, *British Marxist Historians*, p228.
- 81 Kaye, *British Marxist Historians*, p23.
- 82 Kaye, *British Marxist Historians*, p35.
- 83 Dobb, *Studies*, pp12-13.
- 84 Dobb, *Studies*, p13.
- 85 Shenk, *Maurice Dobb*, pp101-2.
- 86 Gustav Wetter, *Dialectical Materialism. A Historical and Systematic Survey of Philosophy in the Soviet Union* (London, 1958 edn), p119.
- 87 Werskey, *Visible College*, p74.
- 88 Vladimir Lenin, *State and Revolution: The Marxist Theory of the State and the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution* (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2011 edn [1917]), p30.
- 89 Hobsbawm, 'Historians' Group', p22.
- 90 Cornforth, *Materialism*, p54.
- 91 Hobsbawm, 'Review of *Schumpeter*', p73.
- 92 Hobsbawm, *On History*, p178.
- 93 Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism*, p27.
- 94 Richard Johnson, 'Reading for the best Marx: history-writing and historical abstraction' in Johnson, *Making Histories*, p154.
- 95 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p201.