Hobsbawm – the Forward March of Labour Halted?

 Exactly forty years ago, in October 1981, one of the most important collections of essays from the British Left ever published saw the light of day. The keynote essay, already published three years earlier in the Communist journal Marxism Today was Eric Hobsbawm’s provocative The Forward March of Labour Halted? which had sparked 17 responses. The essay produced an intense debate which justified book publication, and the book has never been out of print. Its echo can be dimly heard even today, notably in Patrick Diamond’s Routledge book on Labour Politics 1979 – 2019 subtitled Forward March Halted * but essentially the argument, and Hobsbam’s essay, has been forgotten.

 This is unfortunate. While the book itself is easily filed away as an essay on Communist themes, the essay itself is more than a period piece. This has become more obvious since the 2019 General Election and the defection of the so-called “Red Wall” working class seats to Boris Johnson’s Conservatives. The shock might not have been so severe had the initial essay not been dismissed as an episode in the steady demise of the Communist Party and forgotten.

 Though ‘Labour’ for Hobsbawm meant the Labour Movement and not the Labour Party, the essay raised key issues about electoral behaviour – where the Labour Party had the near monopoly on working class voters – in a country which still had a large element of heavy industry, with coal mines, factories, council housing and so on. These would not survive the coming of Thatcherism, which Hobsbawm did not anticipate, but the lecture focussed on the role class had played in Britain as a mature industrial society and which his expertise as a historian made him well placed to analyse. Hobsbawm’s essay
was simultaneously part of the 1970s debate on class dealignment and political consciousness, and that on the future of orthodox communism. While the communist movement died, the wider issues are of continuing relevance.

The lecture was presented as the Marx memorial lecture 1978 and was originally published in *Marxism Today* (September 1978 pp279-286), so the paper is rooted in the politics of the CPGB (Communist Party of Great Britain), but non Marxists found the Marxist analysis useful as Labour habitually saw the working class as their core vote. Many still do so today on both left and right of the Party**. Indeed Labour’s 2019 manifesto stated

“The Labour Party was founded to give working class people a voice in politics” (p81)

True, but the question the essay posed is whether the class which was the focus of the original Labour Representation Committee (LRC) of 1900 is the progressive force that Marx had anticipated. The LRC was not, of course a Marxist organization and the Social Democratic Federation as an original affiliate of the LRC which did look to Marx struggled to accept the parliamentary focus of the LRC. Unlike the Fabians and ILP the SDF did not remain. But before the First World war there was a strong belief that a working class which still did not have the vote – some 40% of the poorer males and no women lacked the franchise – would swing massively behind the new organization, so the Marxists reluctantly joined in when the Committee was set up.

A smaller number of activists were attracted to the perspective that Marx and Engels adopted in 1848 that a large working class meant a proletarian revolution. This was the position of orthodox Marxists and formed a unifying factor for the Communist Party when it was formed in 1920. Both the LRC and the Communists could therefore see a sizeable working
class as fitting their politics, which is why both Marxists and Labourists could read the Hobsbawm lecture with value when it appeared many years later. Whatever perspective was adopted the growth in numbers and class consciousness of the working class seemed to point towards fundamental political changes, notably when the right to vote was extended in 1918. Hobsbawm gained the ability to command attention sixty years later because as a Marxist he queried whether developments had met expectations.

The Hobsbawn Thesis Examined

The essay is on the internet under the title The Forward March of Labour halted

Stating the Theme

The opening paragraph makes a cursory obeisance to Marx and Engels, establishing that a century before the date of the lecture, Marx and Engels had written nothing on Britain. There was nothing to write about since the assumption they had set out in the Communist Manifesto in 1848, thirty years earlier, that the massive development of a British proletariat would have revolutionary consequences had proved to be a dead end. The meat of the lecture is then revealed, Hobsbawm stating “the forward march of labour and the labour movement which Marx predicted seems to have come to a halt in this country about twenty five to thirty years ago” (Marxism Today p279).

While he uses both ‘labour’ and ‘the labour movement’ – both terms used without capitals – his project is not focused on the Labour Party. He has a wider objective, to raise issues about the political implications of the times he and his audience have lived through, initially by setting them in a historical context back to the Victorian era, which he does in the next six sections.
The first section is the long paragraph, *A working class majority*, contending a working class majority in the population existed for at least half a century before 1918. Hobsbawm sees late Victorian Britain as overwhelmingly proletarian, noting that in 1867 it was estimated by Dudley Baxter that nearly 70% of the population, not including rural workers who were a small grouping, were manual workers.

In the following section – *Decline of Manual Occupations* – he dodges the thorny question of whether the manual workers of the 1860s and 1870s were in Marxist terms a proletariat, with the remarkable statement that “whatever they were they got their hands dirty”. Getting your hands dirty may suffice for a coal miner or grave digger, but defining workers as Angels with Dirty Faces in the nineteenth and twentieth century is overly simplistic. While this weakens his analysis the point Hobsbawm is making is that their numbers declined. The numbers of manual workers had increased to 75% in 1911 and was still 70% in 1931, when Labour gained its worst parliamentary total in the century following the First World War. It then declined to 64% in 1961 and a little over half in 1976. (p279). *The decline in numbers of manual workers and the shift in their political behaviour did not happen just in the Red Wall seats in 2019, a much longer appreciation of the shifts in and around manual labour is needed – and Hobsbawm flagged up key issues four decades earlier.*

Hobsbawm remained committed in this paper to an approach where wage labour is not the definition of working class, the defining factor is the need to use soap and water at the end of the working day. Hobsbawm is explicit about identifying working class status and grime, making the manual – physical – nature of work its guarantee of authenticity and this would be widely accepted on the left, even in the Labour Party though since 1918 and the new constitution penned by Sidney Webb which welcomed “the workers by hand or brain” the party has not distinguished between manual and non manual workers. *This*
has and continues to have political consequences, notably in the debate over the Red Wall seats.

Hobsbawm is clear that there had been no decline in the proletariat as such by 1978, “in the technical sense” and states “people selling their labour power plus dependants has continued to increase”. (p279) The significant fact for Hobsbawm given his workerist perspective was that within the overall working class group the manual working class had continued to decline – by 1976 he says the proportion of the population in non manual work had reached 45%. (p280) – and this trend was “the first major development of the last hundred years”. In 1871 he thinks the group which would have included Bob Cratchit involved less than 200,000 out of about 12 million employed persons but “By 1976 about 45% of the occupied population could be classified as non manual”.

He reverts to analyzing the Victorian manual working class, which he sees as dominated by two factors, lack of mechanical skills generating a labour aristocracy which had craft skills and the higher wages which came from these. But secondly a “Historic Transformation” took place forcing the labour aristocracy into an alliance with the unskilled unions as the strata of white collar and professional employment grew and identified with the middle class – at least until the period after the Second World War (p281)

The final section of the six dealing with the working class as Hobsbawm saw it revolves around a distinctive lifestyle emerging from the period after the skilled workers were granted the vote in the Second Reform Bill (1867). Hobsbawm claimed that the working class developed a common ‘style of proletarian life’ from the 1880s to the 1950s, including such elements as the Labour Party, unions and the co-operative
movement. The football culture, fish and chip shops, and the flat cap had emerged before the First World War, the council house, picture house and palais de dance (p282) after the war. This was the scenery that L S Lowry painted in Manchester and Salford. A point which is vital to Hobsbawm’s later argument but is almost thrown away is that he believed that this “common style” “began to be eroded in the 1950s”. This was affected by developments in capitalism itself, to which the essay now turns.

The two paragraphs headed Changes in British Capitalism seek to set the economic context, Hobsbawm defining four changes he sees as altering capitalism but which only applied briefly to the world of the post war Keynesian consensus. The paper was overtaken by events in discussing “the enormous concentration of the productive unit”. His comment that “the capitalist sector is no longer one dominated by the free market” (p282), and views on the large state sector demonstrate Hobsbawm had no crystal ball and could not foresee the crash of 1980-82 still less the destruction of the Keynesian post war consensus by Thatcher and the redominance of neo liberal free market ideas.

He is on much stronger ground in touching on changes in the nature of working class politics. As Hobsbawm saw class politics in the years after the First World War, the major division was between “a manual working class which increasingly tended to vote for its class party and a white collar stratum which…. was predominantly conservative”. (p282). This model formed the template for the expectation of political loyalties from the early 1920s onward when the Liberal Party collapsed, and which overshadowed the hopes of Sidney Webb that the party could draw on the growing white collar workforce. The stresses affecting the model are now top of the political agenda threatening a new restructuring with national parties replacing Labour. Hobsbawm could not foresee this but did understand that in the 1970s the old class
pattern since 1918 was questionable.

Though the model allowed Labour to gain support after the First World War, Hobsbawm highlighted internal divisions which were changing the working class. Firstly the growth of women workers, following the granting of the vote in 1918, as a reward for war work. Secondly, he noted the growth of immigration, though this — with the exception of Irish immigration — was marginal till after the second world war, and led to the growth of racism. He describes, correctly, the way regional and national divisions — and he could have added religious divisions — in Britain were subsumed in a class consciousness which meant that people in the same social positions were rarely divided as they were on the continent. Thirdly, he saw how sectional differences had developed, from the old labour aristocracy of the nineteenth century, through demarcation disputes and stratification arising from grade differentials and changes in wage payments — noting how changes in how workers were paid affected their lives — he mentions systematic overtime and the reliance on multiple job incomes as women and men contributed to the family income unlike in the masculine dominated nineteenth century. Today he would have to talk about job insecurity and multi tasking as a pattern of a 5 day week defining working practices on the famous 9-5 basis have declined. He ended this section by noting strikes were as likely to divide the working class as unite it, a grim reality especially for a communist.

Hobsbawm comments perceptively on the decline in the progressive vote, arguing it — the combined Labour and Communist vote, though there were very few Communist voters, a fact Hobsbawm does not mention— rose steadily up to 1951 when Labour’s vote reached 14m then dropped away having achieved a percentage of 49%. The percentage did not rise again till
1966 when it reached 48% then dropped again, being well under 40% in 1974. The Tories also dropped from their peak of 13.5 million in 1959, “but that is no consolation” (p285). The only positive feature he could find is the mobilization of “the ‘new’ aristocracy of the white collar and technical and professional workers”. Yet with a workerist analysis he could not see this as a major gain, nor could he comment on why the Communist Party had failed to make serious political gains.

He had already commented on the membership of unions, total membership showing recovery up to the early 1970s when figures as a percentage of the work force were around the figure of 1948, but with 35% of the workforce not joining trade unions for the previous 30 years he argued it has always been the case that trade union density is lower than in comparable European countries and state benefits have also been lower. Since he wrote and the Thatcher offensive, the role of unions in Britain has become more problematic. This was particularly ominous for the CPGB, against a history – not mentioned by Hobsbawm – of failure to turn trade union activity into political success. As the Communist Party had made its major strategy work within unions notably by leading strikes, why this failed to deliver the goods for the CP was something any serious history should have considered. This was a story of failure well before the party disintegrated a decade later after the failure of Soviet Communism, which took European Communism as whole into the knackers yard. While the CP provided Hobsbawm with a platform its failures it also limited the extent of his analysis of the halting of progress.

Finally, he notes that the greatest division was between the poor and the rest. While not commenting on Marx’s view of the poor as a lumpenproletariat, he notes that the poor rarely join unions. Whether they voted in the same numbers as the wealthier classes he does not discuss, but declining voting turnout is an issue of continuing relevance. The middle classes have always tended to vote more, though it is possible the
working class vote matched the Tory areas in the middle of the twentieth century. It is likely manual working class voters may have ceased to vote after Labour’s 1979 landslide – turnout dropped in 2001 to 59% and has not risen to the 70% achieved in the years before 1979. Why this is the case has rarely been examined, but the issues have become sharper since Hobsbawm wrote.

A ‘Lost’ Essay Which Should Be Recovered

Hobsbawm’s essay and the book which followed became lost in developments which followed in the subsequent decade. The ‘Winter of Discontent’ of union militancy 1978-79 showed that problems facing the Labour Movement were in part due to internal conflicts. The election of the most right wing Tory regime yet seen in 1979 was a continuation and intensification of problems which had led to previous defeats. The unions would suffer badly under Thatcher, showing their power was much overestimated. The failure of the Communist Movement was dramatized by the collapse of the USSR and events in Eastern Europe, throwing a long shadow over the essay and its closing paragraph.

HH Hobsbawm’s concluding paragraph – Forward March Faltered – opened with the bare statement that “we cannot rely on a simple form of historical determinism to restore the forward march of British Labour which began to falter thirty years ago” (p286). There is little in the preceding essay to make the start date 1948, nor did his injunction, to his communist audience that they needed to “analyse the reasons, historical and otherwise, for the failures as well as the successes of the labour movement...” address their own limitations. The injunction did achieve an outcome in the responses published in the 1981 book but the achievement was limited. His final
comment “We should have done this even while we were waiting for British capitalism to enter its period of dramatic crisis. We cannot afford not to do it now that it has” could not carry much credibility. The CP was entering a crisis far sharper than Britain under Thatcher, and the collapse of the Soviet Union effectively removed Hobsbawm’s thesis from public consciousness. Thatcherism destroyed the post war consensus he believed had set the economic scene, while New Labour regained office after the four election defeats after Hobsbawm had set to work — advertised in the CP daily the Morning Star. That they have lost another four elections, eight in total of the eleven held since Hobsbawm spoke, indicates he was pointing in the right direction. However events worked against him.

It is telling that Richard J Evans extensive biography of Hobsbawm, published in 2019*** seeing him only as a historian, devotes a mere two pages to the essay and has more on his talks to Labour Leftist Tony Benn than to the essay, underlining its relatively invisibility- Claire Ainsley now Keir Starmer’s Policy Director in her book on class the previous year has nothing at all on Hobsbawm. Yet in the light of the very poor debate on the Red Wall constituencies lost by Labour in 2019 the essay needs to be recovered. His fundamental premise is right. Earlier generations of activists, Fabians as well as Marxists, had seen working class majorities as inevitable and the transformation of capitalist societies as logically inevitable. What has gone wrong, how and when?

Four decades after it was written, Hobsbawm’s essay for all its limits and Marxist assumptions remains an extensively empirically based study of problems which have not gone away. It is clearly superior to most of the comments on the so called Red Wall seats and Labour’s current problems. The Forward March of Labour Halted is now required reading for those who want a serious debate about progressive politics.
*The British Labour Party in opposition and power 1979 – 2019
Forward March Halted Patrick Diamond, Routledge, 2019

**Keir Starmer has also embraced the cause making as his policy director Claire Ainsley author of THE NEW WORKING CLASS. (Policy Press 1st edition May 2018)

*** Eric Hobsbawm A Life in History, Richard J Evans, Little, Brown 2019 Trevor Fisher 20 10 21