

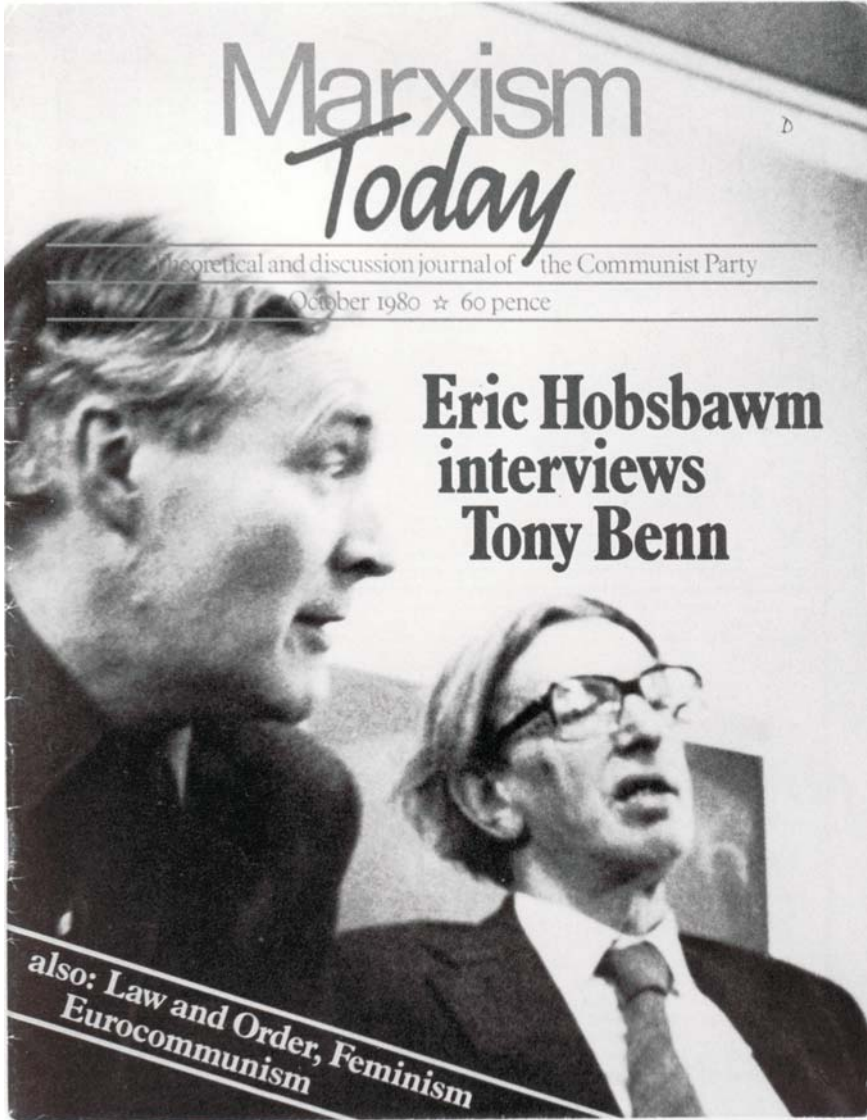
# PRESENTATION/PRÉSENTATION

## From “Old Left” to “New Labour”? Eric Hobsbawm and the Rhetoric of “Realistic Marxism”

Herbert Pimlott

THE RISE OF TONY BLAIR and “New Labour” has generally been understood as the result of the 18-year-long hegemony of Conservative Party rule under Margaret Thatcher and John Major, from 1979 until 1997, wherein the Labour Party was forced to make fundamental changes to its program and values, ditching shibboleths and apparently “unpopular” policies, to make itself again electable. This process, however, involved deepening divisions within the party until the defeat of the Labour Left and the rise of “New Labour.” The latter’s takeover of the Labour Party could not have happened without the abandonment or modification of its traditional policies. It was the debate launched over the significance of Labour’s loss of the general election in June 1983, the second out of four successive electoral defeats between 1979 and 1992, which became the fulcrum of division across the Left, and not just within the Labour Party. It is from this particular historical conjuncture that we can see the opening up of what would become the path towards New Labour as the debate led to the “rethinking” and “realignment” of the Left and the abandonment of many of the traditional objectives of “Old Labour.” The debate brought out intense struggles within both the Labour and Communist parties, and their subsequent loss of thousands of members. It is the process, however, which has not been understood and the role of individuals who have contributed to that process: Eric Hobsbawm and the rhetoric of “realistic Marxism.”

Herbert Pimlott, “From ‘Old Left’ to ‘New Labour’? Eric Hobsbawm and the Rhetoric of ‘Realistic Marxism’,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 56 (Fall 2005), 175-97.



The cover story of Eric Hobsbawm’s interview with Tony Benn was part of *Marxism Today*’s intervention into the debates over the direction of the Labour Party. Under the editorship of Martin Jacques, *Marxism Today* became both a forum for debates about the direction of the Left and the vehicle for the promotion and dissemination of “realistic Marxism.” Eric Hobsbawm’s contributions were the most frequently reprinted of all contributions from the CPGB’s “theoretical and discussion journal” in the UK broadsheet press. Photo by *Media Technology Resources, Wilfrid Laurier University*.

E.P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm, two of the best known British Marxist historians who have had life-long commitments to socialist and working-class politics, became the two most politically engaged, high-profile intellectuals of that former group in the contemporary political issues of the late 1970s and 1980s, the European peace and British Labour movements respectively. Both historians were clear about the application of their own analysis and understanding of the past to contemporary political issues of importance. While the influence of both on history and historians has been the topic of a number of studies, Thompson's direct interventions and engagement in politics has been more widely recognized and understood than that of Hobsbawm's to date.<sup>1</sup>

However, Hobsbawm's contributions, while widely recognized, are not as obviously or as closely connected to his political interventions that began to take place during the 1980s in the struggle over the trajectory of the Labour Party and working-class politics. Both historians engaged politically during their later professional and personal lives, doing so on both international and national levels in ways that underline their own importance to the fields of historical inquiry and highlight the importance of understanding the past in order to struggle for a better future.

Hobsbawm and Thompson were both able to make effective, persuasive interventions in public debates because of their rhetorical and writing skills. While the relationships between intellectual research and political commitment, and indeed political engagement, have been identified amongst social, labour, and Marxist historians, such as the Communist Party of Great Britain's [CPGB] Historians' Group, there are few, if any, examinations of the rhetorical and communications *process* by which such public intellectual activity is made: i.e., the "how" of political interventions. This paper addresses this important area in examining the means by which Hobsbawm was able to intervene effectively in public debates, having a direct impact on the Labour Party's future trajectory. Hobsbawm exercised considerable influence in the highly public political infighting within the Labour Party, even though he was a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, and he was able to effect changes through his contributions to debates which affected both political parties simultaneously.

Indeed, Eric Hobsbawm came to be referred to as "Neil Kinnock's Favourite Marxist," despite having no close intellectual or personal relationship to the leader of the Labour Party, a statement of his alleged influence on Kinnock's "re-making" of the Labour Party. Hobsbawm's interventions can be seen as preparing the ground for Tony Blair, New Labour, and Antony Giddens, the supposedly theoretical and academic inspiration for the much heralded "third way."

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Bryan D. Palmer, *The Making of E.P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism, and History* (Toronto 1981), and *E.P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions* (London and New York 1994); Harvey J. Kaye, "E.P. Thompson, the British Marxist Historical Tradition and the Contemporary Crisis," in *The Education of Desire: Marxists and the Writing of History* (New York and London 1992), 98-115.

From the opening of the 1980s discussion on the “crisis of the Left,” Eric Hobsbawm performed an important role as a polemicist and rhetorician, intervening in the debate over the direction of the Labour Party. From the start, Hobsbawm’s writings were influential because they contributed to the defeat of the (so-called) “hard Left” within both the Labour Party and the Communist Party. In particular, his writings, published in *Marxism Today*, were especially effective for three reasons: first, they provided a plausible story within a rhetoric of “realistic Marxism,” which undermined countervailing arguments by providing only two choices, one of which was always “unrealistic”; second, Hobsbawm’s articles invented a series of vivid metaphors which undermined opponents’ credibility; third, the phrasing and arguments of this body of writing’s presentation of “realistic Marxism” was picked up and promoted by the mainstream press, including both centre-left and right-wing newspapers.

The origins of this change in direction can be seen even before Thatcher’s first electoral victory in May 1979. It was Hobsbawm, the distinguished social and economic historian, Marxist and member of the CPGB, who first pointed to problems with the labour movement in his Marx Memorial Lecture, “The British Working Class One Hundred Years after Marx,” delivered to a small audience of fellow Marxists in March 1978. Hobsbawm’s lecture proved to be a wedge which opened the door to dispute over key ideas about the labour movement, such as the vanguard role of the Communist Party and the working class as the primary agent in social transformation. The lecture was picked up by the CPGB’s Martin-Jacques-edited, theoretical and discussion journal, *Marxism Today*, provocatively re-titled as the “Forward March of Labour Halted?,” and subsequently promoted to leading members of the labour movement and the Left.<sup>2</sup> The lively responses that Hobsbawm’s foray provoked from activists and academics were published in the Communist journal between September 1978 and August 1979, to which Hobsbawm offered a later response. The debate was considered of such significance that in 1981 Verso, formerly New Left Books, re-published the entire discussion with additional responses from leading members of the Left.<sup>3</sup>

As the standard-bearer for the “reformist” wing of the CPGB in the years 1977-1991, *Marxism Today* played an invaluable role in disseminating Hobsbawm’s criticisms far more widely than they otherwise would have been.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Eric Hobsbawm, “Preface,” *Politics for a Rational Left: Political Writings, 1977-88* (London 1989), 1.

<sup>3</sup>Martin Jacques and Francis Mulhern, eds., “Editors’ Preface,” *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* (London 1981).

<sup>4</sup>The shifting alliances that took place between what I have described as “reformist” and “traditional” wings of the Party belies a much more complex relationship of shifting factions and groupings, not always or easily characterized as being uniform in both goals and ideologies. However, for reasons of brevity and focus, I have maintained a simple separation for the purposes of the stances taken for or against Hobsbawm and “realistic Marxism.” For the

The reformist wing began coalescing after 1968, when the CPGB leadership publicly criticized the USSR for crushing the Czechoslovak experiment in “socialism with a human face,” and the failure of the Paris “events” of May-June 1968, in part because of the French CP’s lack of support for the student revolutionaries, refocused radical strategy for social change as a “long march through the institutions.” This long-term focus alongside a revival of interest in Marxism brought about an influx of white-collar workers and professionals, students and lecturers into the Party. The reformists’ broad church was an informal coalition between party officials, intellectuals, and activists influenced by the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, Eurocommunism, and anti-Stalinism and drawn to the ideas and practices of the “new” social movements and the Italian CP. Opposing this new programmatic orientation was the Party’s “traditionalist” wing, composed of those who wanted to retain ideological orthodoxy and “revolutionary rhetoric,” including a view of the primacy of the organized working class and close connections with the Soviet Union as the supposed living embodiment of socialism.

Working with others interested in reforming the party, *Marxism Today* soon became a forum and a promotional vehicle for re-thinking, not just the CPGB’s, but also the Labour Party’s, conventional wisdoms. During the 1980s, the publication became one of the most influential magazines on the Left, moving from the obscurity of its original role as the CPGB’s “theoretical and discussion journal” in the mid-1970s, to the national public sphere. By the mid-1980s, *Marxism Today* had transformed itself from a staid, dense journal into a “glossy,” news-style magazine, offering ongoing cultural commentary and intervening in public debates over the future of the Labour Party.<sup>5</sup>

As *Marxism Today* was a CPGB publication and one with a powerful opposition from the traditionalist wing of a beleaguered communist movement, Jacques had to be cautious about how far he could push the envelope of revisionist discussion. Although Hobsbawm was aware that historical analysis did have “political implications,” he had “not intended to start a debate.”<sup>6</sup> However, this is precisely what Jacques’s journal succeeded in doing. Increasingly this debate spread to other forums on the Left, including the Labour Party and the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party [SWP]. Jacques published Hobsbawm’s retrospective assessment of the labour movement’s waning strengths in the September 1978 issue at the start of the annual Trades Union Congress [TUC] conference, its appearance timed to have maximum impact. This proved to be the first of several of Hobsbawm’s writings that was promoted to the national press, particularly *The Guardian*, the most impor-

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Party’s history, see Willie Thompson, *The Good Old Cause: British Communism, 1920-1991* (London 1992).

<sup>5</sup>See Herbert Pimlott, “From the Margins to the Mainstream: The Transformation of *Marxism Today*,” in James Curran, ed., *Media Organisations and Society* (London 1999), 193-211.

<sup>6</sup>Hobsbawm, *Politics*, 1.

tant centre-left national newspaper during the 1980s. This was part of *Marxism Today*'s conscious strategy to intervene in debates over the crisis of the Left. Hobsbawm's articles and interviews were often reprinted on *The Guardian*'s "Agenda" page. Of the 30 reprints of *Marxism Today*'s feature articles that appeared in *The Guardian* over the course of the 1980s, ten were articles or interviews by or with Hobsbawm, making him by far the most popular of all contributors.<sup>7</sup>

The primary theme of these critiques reiterated for public debate was the crisis of the Left, which after the 1983 defeat was sometimes more specifically spelled out as Labour's failure to recognize social and cultural shifts taking place and to adapt to them, making the necessary shifts in ideology and values, and appealing to a cross-class electoral alliance.<sup>8</sup> This defeat, Hobsbawm argued, indicated that the majority of the British public would not vote for Labour even though it had its most "socialist" party program ever. Indeed, of the greatest significance was that Labour received a mere 28 per cent of the vote, only 2 per cent more than the third party, Social Democratic Party/Liberal Alliance, and it did not even win a majority of those groups which traditionally supported Labour, such as industrial workers and the unemployed. This meant that Labour could no longer rely on seeming material interests to automatically deliver the working-class vote. It had to address a larger public, which meant focusing on developing policies which could gain popular support: "Change the Party, Not the Workers" ("Labour's Lost Millions") and "Labour Must Go Forward with the Masses" ("Labour: Rump or Rebirth?") were but two of *The Guardian*'s headlines leading to Hobsbawm articles that made specific political points most provocatively.

There is considerable merit to Hobsbawm's argument on the strategy for Labour after its June 1983 electoral defeat. He focused on the need for a cross-class alliance that would bring together the broadest coalition of anti-Thatcher forces possible into an electoral alliance backing the Labour Party (which would make the necessary policy compromises), since Thatcher's popular vote was between 42 and 44 per cent. His argument, based upon the 1930s-type 'popular front' strategy, made sense because of Labour's historic cross-class alliance between the professional and public-sector middle classes and the working class that brought about the 1945 Labour electoral landslide. Labour had attracted a lot of socialists and Marxists into the Party after the 1979 defeat, when it appeared that Tony Benn and the Labour Left had a chance to assert not just influence but actual leadership over the Party. It was in part Hobsbawm's attempt to derail this shift in the Labour Party after 1983, which meant that he ignored problems with intra-party democracy, and the way in which the Labour Right, which has to shoulder some of the blame, contributed to the division of the opposition (e.g., the SDP split from Labour), in their

<sup>7</sup>Herbert Pimlott, "From the Margins to the Mainstream: The Transformation of *Marxism Today*," PhD dissertation, University of London, 2000, 165.

<sup>8</sup>See, also, Gareth Stedman Jones, "Why the Labour Party is in a Mess," *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge 1983), 239-256.

unwillingness to accept left-wing policies and positions (an ongoing process throughout the 1970s).<sup>9</sup>

It is the development of this new discourse of “realistic Marxism” that begins the process of dismantling what Hobsbawm and others promoted as a “logjam” of thinking on the Left. The “realignment of the Left,” as it became known, involved re-thinking traditional approaches to issues such as nationalization, social housing and welfare because they no longer appeared to have the support of the public. One can appreciate how far New Labour shifted its policies from “Old” Labour in 1983 by comparing them to Tony Blair’s policies in office since 1997.<sup>10</sup> Hobsbawm’s interventions were persuasive because of his ability to situate the only two possible options for the Left in such a way that “there is [was] no alternative,” a phrase made famous by Thatcher in her ripostes to those who would question her leadership. By implication, there was no future for class-based militancy, particularly if it was understood as led by the organized industrial working class. For if the core industrial working class was in decline, if its forward march had indeed been halted, relying on its strength as central to any counter-hegemonic strategy was a dead end.

#### *The Rhetoric of “Realism”*

In the worlds of international relations, economics, and politics, the rhetoric of “realism” is a powerful tool of persuasion. It works to limit debate because it presents itself as offering “facts” which are, by definition, not open to dispute. Facts make it impossible to dispute realism’s framing of an issue. Realism is a “generally available discursive practice,” that is, “a familiar, pervasive, and often pre-eminent way of speaking” which disciplines “comprehension and conduct,” which limits and

<sup>9</sup>Stedman Jones, “Why the Labour Party is in a Mess”; Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat from Class: A New ‘True’ Socialism* (London 1986), 3 n. 3; David Coates, *The Crisis of Labour: Industrial Relations and the State in Contemporary Britain* (Oxford 1989), 99, 175-78; Leo Panitch and Colin Leys, *The End of Parliamentary Socialism? From New Left to New Labour* (London 1997), 210-12.

<sup>10</sup>See Geoff Andrews, “The Three New Lefts and Their Legacies,” and Richard Cockett, “The New Right and the 1960s: the Dialectics of Liberation,” in G. Andrews, R. Cockett, A. Hooper, and M. Williams, eds., *New Left, New Right and Beyond: Taking the Sixties Seriously* (Basingstoke, Hampshire 1999), 66-84, esp. 78-81, and 103. On *Marxism Today*’s role in the “rethinking” see, for example, Leo Panitch, “Rethinking the Labour Party’s Transition from Socialism to Capitalism,” and Alex Callinicos, “Tony Blair and the British Left,” in Abigail B. Bakan and Eleanor MacDonald, eds., *Critical Political Studies: Debates and Dialogues from the Left* (Montreal and Kingston 2002), 57-66, esp. 63-65, and 67-87, esp. 78-80 (in which Callinicos also indicates the shift between 1979 and 1983 in the Labour Party was a leftward shift whereas New Labour moved back to where the Labour Party had been originally).

constrains the possibilities for change.<sup>11</sup> As the narrative of realism “sets the scene,” it effectively “structures subsequent argument.”<sup>12</sup>

Realism, thus understood, has played a particular role in Western liberal democracies, particularly in the realm of international politics and public debates over economic policy. For example, the appeal to “realism” or “*realpolitik*” in discussions around the support of western democracies for dictatorships in other parts of the world is often made upon such grounds. Used in this way, realism is an approach to the world that takes it “as it exists” and does not put expectations upon the motivations of other human actors in non-Western, non-democratic parts of the world. The approach of Beer and Hariman can be drawn upon and applied to domestic politics because similar patterns of justifications and rhetorical appeals have been and continue to be evident in the public discussions over the North American Free Trade Agreement, the World Trade Organization, and other areas of economic and political contestation.

Realism is more powerful than other “theories” and ideological frameworks because it works by self-justification: in only presenting that which is, drawing upon the obvious, “objective reality,” the “world of facts,” it claims to represent the essences of global, national, or class politics without any distortion or misrepresentation. It is “eternal” and “timeless” because it can account for any situation in political affairs of the past, present, or future.

The importance and effectiveness of “realism” is due to its pervasiveness within Western culture. Indeed, realism is so embedded in our language and thinking that “it can operate effectively in fragments,” being invoked in short phrases and even offhand comments, rather than through any kind of coherent political discourse. Its ubiquitous nature means that the entire code of “political realism” “can be activated any time we are reminded, e.g., that people are by nature self-interested, that law is useless without enforcement, or that testaments of common ideals are mere rhetoric.”

A realist’s understanding of politics is thus one in which the facts of political competition “are grounded in human nature and confirmed by political history.” A realist in world, national, or class politics would argue that it is necessary “to see things as they are rather than as we would want them to be.” One can claim that one’s arguments are based in “objective” reality rather than in “fantasy,” “words,” “slogans,” or “ideals.” The realist does not want to see things according to a vision of human nature, that is the “alternative [or Marxist] account” and understanding of human beings in general and workers in particular, which lauds them for their inherent and political radicalness (revolutionary potential) and the dignity of their la-

<sup>11</sup>Robert A. Hariman cited in James Arnt Aune, *Rhetoric and Marxism* (Boulder, CO 1994), 60.

<sup>12</sup>Francis A. Beer and Robert A. Hariman, “Realism and Rhetoric in International Relations,” in Beer and Hariman, eds., *Post-Realism: The Rhetorical Turn in International Relations* (East Lansing, MI 1996), 3.



bour. Realists would argue that Marxist conceptions, not only of the working class, but also of humanity, are *not* common-sensical or grounded in *real* human nature, but are in a way *wanting* to see a particular type of human being. These “[a]lternative accounts are either delusions ... or special pleading,” whereas realism, by contrast, is only too aware of “the fatal limitations of human nature.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, the end result of Communist gulags, for example, should come as no surprise.

Realism, therefore, is not a term that is commonly applied to Marxists, especially not in reference to their ideals and values, whether expressed in party manifestos, histories, or thinkers. It is a term that has been challenged by Marxists, particularly as they have indicated that capitalist societies and their precursors have often ensured their rule over the masses by processes of “mystification,” of masking “reality” from the oppressed, of engendering “false consciousness.” The “scientific method” of Marx and Engels, as understood by their followers, is necessary to reveal the actualities behind the façade of capitalism. Nonetheless, there are those who argue that some forms of Marxism, such as that advocated by V.I. Lenin, are a form of “realism.”<sup>14</sup>

Realism also points to a fundamental division on the Left between “idealists” and “realists,” or as more commonly labeled among socialists themselves, between “reformists” and “revolutionaries,” or “social democrats” and “revolutionary socialists.” This division is based upon a fundamental difference in terms of both strategy and tactics: reformists, “realists,” social democrats, *et al.*, see the value and importance of working within the system, of using the tools of capitalism to make it more humane, whereas revolutionaries and idealists are more committed to a fundamental shift in power relations and argue that the ruling class will not give up power without a fight (something which they argue, by contrast, is a “realistic” assessment of the nature of capitalism).<sup>15</sup> It was on this division that Hobsbawm premised his appeal to Labour supporters and Communist Party members alike, castigating the so-called “hard Left” (i.e., the revolutionary or idealist Left) for its refusal to see things “as they are.”

*Eric Hobsbawm, “Realistic Marxism,” and the Left*

Eric Hobsbawm’s Marx Memorial lecture, “The Forward March of Labour Halted?,” was the opening shot in a series of interventions *via Marxism Today*, in which the old popular frontist made use of “realism,” a trope which has been used in the past by Marxists, from Lenin to Dimitrov, and socialists alike, in part to win the argument over the tactics and strategy to be adopted by the Party in particular or the

<sup>13</sup>The above paragraphs draw on Beer and Hariman, “Realism and Rhetoric in International Relations,” and Hariman, “Henry Kissinger: Realism’s Rational Actor,” in Beer and Hariman, eds., *Post-Realism*, 3-5, 35.

<sup>14</sup>Aune, *Rhetoric and Marxism*, 58-62.

<sup>15</sup>See, for example, Aune’s accounts of the rhetoric and politics of Eduard Bernstein and V.I. Lenin in *Rhetoric and Marxism*, 52-62.



The new second format of *Marxism Today* was more in keeping with the format of contemporary news-magazines, starting with the October 1979 issue (left). In the aftermath of Labour's disastrous general election showing in June 1983, Eric Hobsbawm's feature articles, "Labour's Lost Millions" and "Labour: Rump or Rebirth?"; published respectively in the October 1983 (centre) and March 1984 (right) issues, were critical interventions which provoked intense debate over the Labour Party's future. Photo by *Media Technology Resources, Wilfrid Laurier University*.

Left in general. In Hobsbawm's political writings as well as among other *Marxism Today* contributors, "realism" became the dominant metaphor. His straightforward, "realistic" story of the decline of the British working class provided the only possible narrative of Labour's limitations and ostensible solutions. Hobsbawm's representation was and is difficult to argue with because he presents his interpretation of the crisis of the Left as just the "facts," the situation "as it is." He recognized that to defeat the Conservatives, electorally, there was a need for an alliance and compromise. An important part of this recognition was, as Hobsbawm made clear, that the masses "must be taken as they are, not as we should like to have them." The subsequent invocation of "realism" in every article he wrote for *Marxism Today* quickly became an integral part of Hobsbawm's rhetorical tactics to win over the undecided and defeat his critics. As with the construction of realism in international relations and economics, Hobsbawm's discourse was also self-validating through appeals to earlier "realist" Marxists, such as Lenin and Georgi Dimitrov.<sup>16</sup>

As part of the Aristotelian approach to rhetorical analysis, there are three elements that play an important part in understanding the degree to which a speaker or writer may be successful in their address: ethos, pathos, and logos. The primary articulator and rhetorician of "realistic Marxism," Hobsbawm's *ethos* is crucial to understanding part of the persuasiveness of his critique of the labour movement. First, Hobsbawm's credibility as a life-long Communist and Marxist scholar gave him an almost unassailable personal position from which to launch his critique of the Left. His engagement with anti-fascist politics during his childhood in the Weimar Republic was an experience that coloured his views on the issue of alliances and which provided him with a strong moral position from which to criticize the Left. Second, he remained a long-standing member of the CPGB after his arrival in Britain in the 1930s and in spite of the events of 1956, which saw the loss of between one-quarter and one-third of Party members, including many leading intellectuals. A Party loyalist, then, Hobsbawm was also capable of being critical of Stalinism and aspects of the Party's policies.<sup>17</sup> As a scholar, he was a figure in the Party's renowned Historians' Group, his credibility as an historian built up over several decades of research and publications. Of all the British Marxist historians, Hobsbawm's international reputation as a social and economic historian was arguably the most wide ranging, uncovering the "unwritten" history of peasants and workers, rebels and revolutionaries. All of this contributed to his stature, not just

<sup>16</sup>Eric Hobsbawm, "Labour: Rump or Rebirth?," *Marxism Today*, 28 (March 1984), 10.

<sup>17</sup>Thompson, *Good Old Cause*, 111; Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain* (Durham, NC 1997), 10-23; Geoff Andrews, "Young Turks and Old Guard: Intellectuals and the Communist Party Leadership in the 1970s," in Geoff Andrews, Nina Fishman, and Kevin Morgan, eds., *Opening the Books: Essays on the Social and Cultural History of the British Communist Party* (London 1995), 225-250; Michael Williams, "The Long Sixties in the Short Twentieth Century," in Andrews *et al.*, eds., *New Left, New Right*, 144-167.

within the CPGB, but across the Left, which enabled him to challenge orthodox beliefs and enhanced his credibility.

Hobsbawm claimed to offer a “realistic” or “concrete” application of Marx’s methods to the socio-historical conjuncture of the late 1970s “as it was” rather than “as we would like it to be.” The “Marx Memorial Lecture” provided Hobsbawm with the place “to survey some developments in the British working class during the past 100 years,” recognizing that Marx himself had little to say a century earlier. He suggested that “our task as marxists” was to apply Marx’s methods “concretely to our own era.”<sup>18</sup> If the labour movement is to recover “its historical initiative,” Hobsbawm argued that,

we, as marxists, must do what Marx would certainly have done: to recognise the novel situation in which we find ourselves, to analyse it realistically and concretely, to analyse the reasons, historical and otherwise, for the failures as well as the successes of the labour movement, and to formulate not only what we would want to do, but what can be done.<sup>19</sup>

Part of an attempt to appeal to Party leaders, thinkers, and members in using the terms “realistically and concretely,” Hobsbawm’s injunction, followed by his highlighting “failures as well as the successes,” implied that perhaps the successes of the workers’ movement had received greater attention and its failures were being ignored.

This use, rhetorically, of “realism” was Hobsbawm’s attempt to get Labour Party thinkers to go beyond the readings of what was taking place on the surface of a series of debates and interventions unleashed in the 1980s. In this endeavour, Hobsbawm limited the focus to things as they were, an approach that narrowed the horizon of possibilities to effective intervention rather than wish-fulfillment. An integral component of Hobsbawm’s rhetorical scaffolding of argument was recourse to the key words “realistically” and “concretely.” Hobsbawm and other *Marxism Today* writers positioned themselves as adopting the same approach that Marx would have done in similar circumstances. Frequent invocation of these critical words invoking the “real” and the “concrete” contributed to positioning the arguments of opponents on the Left as “unrealistic” and other-worldly.

For Hobsbawm, this was the logical outcome of recognizing the shortcomings of Labour’s situation and making the best of it. To communicate this idea to the Left, Hobsbawm increasingly invoked “realism” through a particular rhetorical strategy, in which the “realistic” was the only possible option. This invocation of “realism” was used to devastating effect on the traditional Left, increasingly painted into corners of “unrealism,” contributing to its eventual defeat. Hobsbawm did not best such opponents by his argument alone; the persuasiveness of his claims

<sup>18</sup>Eric Hobsbawm, “The Forward March of Labour Halted?,” *Marxism Today*, 22 (September 1978), 279.

<sup>19</sup>Hobsbawm, “The Forward March,” 286.

became all the greater as his analysis was increasingly borne out by events and drawn on and promoted by individuals and institutions inside and outside the labour movement, including the influential centre-left daily newspaper, *The Guardian*. (There is perhaps an irony here that century-old Marxist debates about the “correct analysis” ended up being adjudicated by a centre-left commercial newspaper with a middle-class readership.)

Hobsbawm justified his perspective as not only “realistic,” but also “Marxist.” It was not only important and necessary to cite the writings of Marx, Engels, and Lenin to indicate that Hobsbawm’s analysis was in keeping with a Marxist — and even a Marxist-Leninist — analysis, but to demonstrate that it was prudent to make compromises and to work in coalitions, ideas which were anathema to those who argued for “purity” of the party line in general and the vanguard role of the Communist Party in particular. In this argument over “compromise” and “coalitions,” Hobsbawm attempted to distinguish between two types of Marxism: one, “which is exhausted in a few agitational phrases or a few simplified formulas and denunciations,” clearly implying very limited scope in thinking, which would not provide the necessary leadership; the other, more adroit, Marxism drew its strength from “the realistic analysis of the historical situation, the developments in capitalism — and socialism — and the actual state of the movement, however unexpected or unprecedented.” This latter type of Marxism was presented as clearly engaging with “reality,” the “actual state of the movement,” rather than in promoting “a few simplified formulas and agitational phrases.”<sup>20</sup>

It was clear from the key words and phrases that Hobsbawm used to invoke the entire discourse of this new “realistic Marxism” that *Marxism Today* and the reformists followed suit. These words and phrases included: “concrete”; “concrete analysis” or “concrete situation”; “reality” or “realism”; and “confront,” especially to “confront reality.” These terms can be seen in the following excerpt, which had become a familiar form by 1985: “*Marxism Today* has made it its business to confront reality and suggest ways of changing it. This is what comrades should recognise as the Leninist procedure of giving concrete analysis of a concrete situation.”<sup>21</sup>

Critical to re-establishing common ground on which Hobsbawm could challenge orthodox beliefs among Communists of the “forward march of labour” towards socialism was the use of Karl Marx to buttress arguments and a mode of analysis: “our task as marxists ... as applying Marx’s methods and general analysis concretely to our own era.” In providing an analysis which, arguably, would later challenge the very basis of a separate Communist Party, Hobsbawm made it clear that his analysis was in keeping with a Marxist analysis. He claimed that Marx and Engels “would have been neither very surprised nor very disappointed by the ten-

<sup>20</sup>Eric Hobsbawm, “The State of the Left in Western Europe,” *Marxism Today*, 26 (October 1982), 15.

<sup>21</sup>*Marxism Today* Editorial Collective, *Marxism Today Colour Supplement, Congress Special*, 18-20 May 1985.

dencies of development in the British working class” because “they did not expect very much from the British working class beyond what actually looked like happening” (i.e., the establishment of a mass political party). Here Hobsbawm elides Marx’s and Engels’s outlook on the probable future of the British working-class movement in the late 19th century with his own analysis and presents it as a “natural” or “inevitable” unfolding of events: a “realistic” assessment of the situation. In Hobsbawm’s presentation, Marx and Engels are “realists,” “like you and me” (the audience of *Marxism Today*). Such a stand proceeded on the basis of a stringent critique of James Callaghan’s Labour government and its introduction of monetarist policies and public sector spending cuts, and a continuing belief in the possibility of a radical, class-conscious working class.<sup>22</sup>

Other Marxist thinkers were also marshalled by Hobsbawm to support his positions. References to Lenin were particularly important because he was the foremost Marxist on the “hard Left,” and Hobsbawm’s citation of the Bolshevik leader worked to undermine a key thinker in the traditionalist camp, whose writings normally provided a justification and a “guide to action” for “fundamentalist” elements on the revolutionary Left. Lenin’s words, which appeared to support Hobsbawm’s argument for a “people-based” rather than a “class-based” party, were important in discrediting those who claimed the mantle of “class politics”: “‘To march forward without compromise without turning from the path’ — if this is said by an obviously impotent minority of workers ... then the slogan is obviously mistaken.”<sup>23</sup> Such appeals became less and less important by the late 1980s, as most traditionalists had stopped reading *Marxism Today* by then and the cleavage between reform and revolution had widened in the “realist” separation.

### *Rhetorical Strategy and Writing Style*

Hobsbawm’s critique revolved around two basic, but fundamental, themes: the Labour Party could no longer rely primarily on the industrial working class as the agency for change, because it was a shrinking percentage of the overall workforce and it was no longer, if it ever had been, wholly supportive of Labour; second, that Labour would have to appeal to a broader public if it was ever to achieve power again. Only an alliance with the other disenfranchised groups and movements, such as the feminist, peace, and environmental movements, as well as ethnic minority groups (i.e., a coalition of everyone opposed to the policies of Thatcher’s Conservative government), would give Labour such a chance in the future.<sup>24</sup> However, those on the “hard Left” believed that radical social change is driven by the most

<sup>22</sup>Hobsbawm, “The Forward March,” 279, 285-286.

<sup>23</sup>V.I. Lenin cited in Hobsbawm, “Labour: Rump or Rebirth?,” 9. In this quotation from “*Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder?*,” Lenin had been referring directly to the British labour movement of 1919-20.

<sup>24</sup>Stedman Jones, “Why the Labour Party is in a Mess.”

politicized sections of the working class, and the agency for mobilizing them is the vanguard party. Nonetheless, Hobsbawm's call for an alliance was in accord with the CPGB's new political program, adopted at the National Congress in 1977, which called for a "broad, democratic alliance" of industrial workers, women, white-collar employees and professionals, and ethnic minorities among others, as the cornerstone of the strategy.

Hobsbawm's rhetorical intervention was clearly built around the need to appeal to two key audiences. The first audience was narrower and composed of CPGB members and sympathizers in the labour movement, including those in the two increasingly distinct wings, traditionalist and reformist. The second targeted group was a broader, general audience composed of Labour Party members and supporters, which included a division between so-called "hard" and "soft" Lefts. The "hard" Left was sympathetic to traditional views of the importance of the organized working class and standard Labour policies, such as nationalization and social housing, whereas the "soft" Left was more anxious to ditch these policies and ideals that were increasingly seen as "unpopular" or "outdated." These two groupings can be broadly equated with the CPGB's traditionalist and reformist wings respectively, but as they existed outside of communism, the reformist contingent appeared to be the greater in numbers.

Hobsbawm's rhetorical style was particularly effective in its constant binary of possibilities, in which, of two opposed positions there is always only one which is "realistic." For example, in "Labour: Rump or Rebirth?," Hobsbawm offered two possible views of the Labour Party. The first position, always the "unrealistic" one, was that of a minority on the Left, mostly Marxists (although even these are a minority) who would write off Labour and form a separate, mass *socialist* party, such as that of the Trotskyist SWP. History demonstrated that this was a "non-starter" because there has been no political organization between 1900, when the Labour Party was formed, and the present, that has "got anywhere" because Labour remains the single party over which everyone else is fighting for influence. One cannot argue with history because history just "is." The second view of the Labour Party was one which "[m]ost socialists, and ... [a] majority of Marxists, have accepted ... as a fact of life." There can be no argument with this "nature" either: "the future of socialism is through the Labour Party." Even the CPGB recognized this, as it "was implicit in its policy since the middle 1930s," and first made explicit in its political program in 1951.<sup>25</sup>

Colloquialisms, first-person pronouns, interjections, and other signs of informality, associated with spoken rather than written communication, were integral to Hobsbawm's writing style, aiming to appeal to both Communist and non-CPGB readers, men and women of the broad Left that would be integral to a refashioning of the Labour Party. These pragmatic particles, asides, and interjections were important aids to Hobsbawm's persuasive goals. While making his writing more ac-

<sup>25</sup>Hobsbawm, "Labour: Rump or Rebirth?," 8-12.

cessible, such stylistic forms reinforced statements as individual, if authoritative, views, rather than the manifestos of a tendency or faction. They simulated his interpretation as dialogue or discussion. Hobsbawm thus had a position from which he could mount critique, but he still had to be cautious in putting forward controversial ideas or challenges to orthodox beliefs, and as part of a dissemination *via Marxism Today*, it was necessary that Hobsbawm at least appear to be putting forth his own views rather than those of any particular organized faction, which would have violated Communist protocols. By reinforcing the individuality of his writing, Hobsbawm was avoiding too close an association of particular ideas with any internal factions. This caution eased as his interventions became more clearly targeted against the traditionalists, but the informal manner of Hobsbawm's presentations helped to simulate or connote dialogue, as if he was responding to and/or expressing the same hesitations or doubts being expressed by the reader, or thinking through ideas, a process which took on the trappings of being more open and conducive to engagement with readers than party speeches and essays.

Hobsbawm was well aware of the "political implications" of his analysis. During the period of his interventions, he had to be careful because those who challenged party orthodoxy, especially the "leading role" of the working class, were liable to be accused of "betrayal," especially by those adhering to traditional positions. His interjections reinforced the "reasonableness" of his view that there was something wrong with "class politics": this was a tactical necessity because of the increasingly vociferous internal opposition to *Marxism Today* by 1984 and the appropriation of the term, "class politics," by opponents of Martin Jacques and his magazine. The importance of such a term was meant to undercut the credibility of Hobsbawm's argument because if his analysis was not a "class" analysis, it would not emphasize the importance and role of the working class and, therefore, it could not be a "true" revolutionary reading. Thus, Hobsbawm's ideas were resolutely presented as "realistic" despite their (ultimate) implications for the *raison d'être* of both the CPGB and an old-style, working-class ordered Labour Party: if little of any consequence can be determined by "being" working class, then for what purpose does a "working class party" exist?

To bring together disparate groups and interests, such as the working and middle classes, one has to be able to speak to all in a manner befitting all sides. For this purpose, the Marxist language of "class war" or "class struggle" was inimical. To speak in such a manner, which draws on a Marxian vocabulary but which neglects the needs of groups other than industrial workers, is to risk isolation as did the CPGB and CPUSA during the sectarian "class against class" policy of the "Third Period" of the Communist International, 1929-34. However, the rise of fascism in the 1930s led to a shift to the Popular Front strategy, where Communist parties sought broad alliances, not only with socialists, but also with all other groups committed to defending democracy, including liberals and even conservatives. This shift led to qualitative differences in the language used by Communist pamphleteers, from the



Third Period's "screaming demands" to the Popular Front's "less fanatic and foreboding ... manifesto-type statements."<sup>26</sup>

The use of Communist terminology tends to militate against acceptance on the part of non-sympathetic audiences because of the awkwardness and strangeness of its rhetoric, a discourse which non-Communists are inculcated against by the circulation and propagation of capitalist ideology and "common sense." It is important to acknowledge that, to the uninitiated, Marxist vocabulary appears to be strange, obfuscatory, and alienating, because its terms are both awkward and unfamiliar, connoting elitism, even "snobbery," and "foreignness." There is some truth to such associations as many of the words adopted by English language CPs were foreign in their origin and did not often translate well into English.<sup>27</sup> This "un-commonness" worked against Marxists, even though their use of Marxism as a "scientific method" meant, as with any science, the use of a specialized vocabulary or "jargon" to attempt to communicate complex ideas precisely.

An important and persuasive part of Hobsbawm's appeal to the Left was his use of and insistence on a "common language" as a necessary part of the "broad democratic alliance" strategy to reach out to "the people." Hobsbawm makes the case that this had been the policy of the Communist Party during the Popular Front era. At the International Writers Congress in 1935, Georgi Dimitrov spoke of the need to use a "common language" to make "common cause" with the "common people," because of the need to establish a broad alliance to defend democracy from fascism. Dimitrov is a figure with credibility for CPGB traditionalists because he was responsible for codifying the Popular Front strategy for the Comintern and he was a hero for standing up to the Nazis at a show trial, where they tried to frame the Communists for the burning of Germany's Reichstag, which had been committed by the Nazis. As Hobsbawm argues, the role of a common language is to make common cause with others who want to achieve the same immediate goals: historically this was to defend democracy and overcome fascism; in the 1980s, it was to defend the welfare state and overcome Thatcherism. Such a goal necessitates an alliance to prevent isolation and ultimately failure. Dimitrov is cited as a leading Communist who articulates a "realistic" position because he insisted that the masses "must be taken as they are, not as we should like to have them," which, Hobsbawm argued, "made sense then and still makes sense."<sup>28</sup> This is also the formative period for Hobsbawm's politics in his youth, as he and his family were forced to flee Germany with the Nazi seizure of power in 1933; drawing upon his personal experiences and the political lessons of this period, the appeal of the Popular Front and its strategic

<sup>26</sup>Carl Burghardt, "Two Faces of American Communism: Pamphlet Rhetoric of the Third Period and the Popular Front," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 66 (1980), 386.

<sup>27</sup>Burghardt, "Two Faces of American Communism," 380-81; Owen Williamson, *Contemporary American Orthodox Marxist Rhetoric* <<http://utminers.utep.edu/omwilliamson/thesisthesis.doc>> (21 January 2004).

<sup>28</sup>Hobsbawm, "Labour: Rump or Rebirth?," 10.

direction would resonate as a high-water mark of communist success and progressive political advance in future writings.<sup>29</sup>

Hobsbawm's interventions in public debate on the Left began to take on "critical mass" after Labour's second general election defeat by the Conservative Party in June 1983. His analysis of Labour's defeat, "Labour's Lost Millions," was reprinted in *The Guardian* at the start of Labour's annual conference, titled "Change the Party, Not the Workers." Hobsbawm wasted no time in getting to the point. His growing impatience with opponents within the labour movement and the CPGB painted critics as incapable of recognizing the obvious "facts" of the situation. Two things now seemed obvious to Hobsbawm as he surveyed the debates of the late 1970s: "*first*, the sheer refusal of some of the Left to look unwelcome facts in the face, even though they were already obvious to any unblinkered observer, and *second*, the failure of even the gloomiest among us to appreciate the rate and distance of Labour's imminent retreat."<sup>30</sup> The metaphor of limited or partial sight is a leading trope linked to the "hard Left," contrasted with the clarity of Hobsbawm's "realism" which "confronts" such "unwelcome facts," not as other-worldly desire, but as actuality.

Hobsbawm's negative characterizations of his opponents on the Left were particularly effective in derailing their criticisms. These were usually launched in the opening paragraphs of his articles, where he would make it clear that those who failed to recognize the "reality" of things "as they are and not as they would wish them to be," were "blinkered" and cannot "face up to the facts": unwilling "to confront reality," the unseeing Left was already retreating behind screens to protect itself from "the grim sight of reality."<sup>31</sup> When opposition to Hobsbawm's critique continued, he became more insistent on how "not even the most blinkered of sectarians" were prepared to claim that Labour had *not* "suffered a disastrous defeat" or, at least, they were not willing to do so "in public."<sup>32</sup> Secondly, to emphasize just how bad things were, he made it clear that the election results were *worse* than expected because "even the gloomiest," i.e., pessimistic "realists" like himself, failed to anticipate that Labour's vote would "suddenly collapse."<sup>33</sup>

In constructing a rhetoric of "realistic Marxism," it was necessary to present a believable image of one's opponents on the Left, which helped to explain "*why*" sections of the Left were not "realistic." This was integral to Hobsbawm's rhetorical style: the images he constructed of his opponents helped to discredit their criticisms. These images resonated with the opponents of the "traditionalist" wing of the CPGB, which applied to the Labour Left as well. These people were constructed

<sup>29</sup>Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (London 2002), 218, 322-24; Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism*, 14-15.

<sup>30</sup>Eric Hobsbawm, "Labour's Lost Millions," *Marxism Today*, 27 (October 1983), 7.

<sup>31</sup>Hobsbawm, "Labour's Lost Millions," 7.

<sup>32</sup>Hobsbawm, "Labour: Rump or Rebirth?," 9.

<sup>33</sup>Hobsbawm, "Labour's Lost Millions," 7.

as “unwilling” to change, to recognize “reality.” An important element in Hobsbawm’s rhetorical intervention, this appeal also played off the widespread “common-sense” understanding of “Communists” as promoted through the mass media.

The effectiveness of Hobsbawm’s rhetorical strategy and writing style can be attributed to his invention and use of plausible, vivid metaphors and “freshly minted images,” which, as scholars of rhetoric have noted, “can be tremendously persuasive.”<sup>34</sup> Vividness is about creating images in the minds of the audience and it is an important element in effective journalism.<sup>35</sup> Words are to be used in imaginative and non-literal ways, as with figures of speech (e.g., simile, metaphor), which can be very persuasive, but can also involve a “clear and precise vocabulary, an active rather than passive grammatical structure, and examples marshalled as evidence.”<sup>36</sup> Hobsbawm’s invention of new figures of speech helped to create vivid, memorable images which were strikingly effective in capturing his opponents as either misguided idealists or ideological, mindless zealots, drawing from popular and highly ideological caricatures of the so-called “hard Left.” Two particularly striking tropes, from Hobsbawm’s intervention within the debates over the Miners’ Strike of 1984-85 (in the cover story published in the April 1985 *Marxism Today* prior to a Special Congress dealing with the CPGB’s “civil war”), were: “building the New Jerusalem like a 1960s tower block”; and “the ready-made set of slogans chanted by photo-fit hard-liners.”<sup>37</sup>

The simile, “building a New Jerusalem like a 1960s tower block,” is used to associate the qualities of the 1960s tower block with “socialist utopia.” The 1960s tower block was widely recognized as unpopular by the 1980s: “socialist utopia” is equated to an aesthetically unappealing architectural form created for the working class by middle-class professionals who did not have to live in it. Using the 19th-century phrase for socialist utopia not only invokes religious references to socialism as a “faith,” with its attendant negative connotations of doctrinaire political “theology” for which “facts” and “reason” are ignored when they threaten belief, it also reinforces the connotations of “socialism” as an ideology connected to an outdated and outmoded past. The simile rather neatly associates the traditionalists’ program with the “qualities” of the tower block, the result of elitist, unrepresentative and undemocratic planning unappealing to the masses it was meant for. There is the decided implication that “socialist utopia” ignores the concerns and desires of the working class.

The second trope focused on the “hard Left” and “Trotskyists,” usually caricatured in right-wing tabloids as a “rent-a-mob,” but more bitinglly lampooned by

<sup>34</sup>R. Cockcroft and S.M. Cockcroft, *Persuading People* (Basingstoke 1992), 119.

<sup>35</sup>Harold Evans, *Newsman’s English* (London 1972); Richard Keeble, *The Newspapers Handbook* (London 1994).

<sup>36</sup>Jodi Cohen, *Communication Criticism* (Thousands Oaks, CA 1998), 39-40.

<sup>37</sup>Eric Hobsbawm, “The Retreat into Extremism,” *Marxism Today*, 29 (April 1985), 10, 12.

Hobsbawm as “photo-fit hard-liners.”<sup>38</sup> The notion of “photo-fit” comes from police use of a combination of different, stock photographic images of facial features to put together a possible “fit” for a criminal suspect. This places traditionalist opponents in a particular position: those who are, by transference and connotation, “suspect” and interchangeable, assembled from “stock” or generic images, as with mannequins or robots, attending demonstrations or protests as rote behaviour, whatever the issue. They “chant” an endless recitation, a “ready-made set of slogans”: no thinking is necessary because it is already done, “ready-made” for whatever situation such leftists find themselves in. Such imagery is richly suggestive of mass-produced, popular caricatures of “mindless Marxist militants,” ably promoted by daily newspapers, especially the Thatcherite tabloid press.

These vivid images were difficult to resist or refute: the strong negative reactions of sections of the Left can be explained by a general understanding that these representations had some, partial, basis in “reality.” Hobsbawm’s criticisms were scathing, especially as the animosity, tension, and polemics “heated up” between the two broad tendencies within the Left of the 1980s, both within the CPGB and outside of it in the Labour Party. Those on the Left who argued that Labour’s difficulties were part of a painful transition from Labourism to Socialism were likened to “oarsmen being congratulated on their rowing much better than ever before while the boat is being swept to the rapids.”<sup>39</sup>

Despite his skills at propagating such forceful imagery, Hobsbawm did use mixed and dead metaphors, which were much less persuasive: he referred to a “glimmer of comfort,” and “making the best of a bad job.”<sup>40</sup> He was not always able to avoid Communist terminology as, for example, with his reply to critics in March 1984: “‘Labour’s Lost Millions’ ... was not a call for retreat into opportunism making the best of a bad job, but a call for advance. It did not even see the broad anti-Thatcherite front which is surely essential today, as a mere defence against encroaching reaction.”<sup>41</sup> The awkwardness in Hobsbawm’s prose is evidence that the traditional Marxist legacy of unsettling and jargonistic prose was not dispensed with overnight (e.g., “retreat into opportunism”; “defence against encroaching reaction”), and it also proved useful in undermining his traditionalist opponents and their claims to party authority or “class politics.”

#### *Hobsbawm and National Press Coverage*

Hobsbawm’s analysis received additional support from what appeared to be, at first, an unlikely source: the national press. *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, and *The Independent*, all papers whose editorial lines were centrist or centre-left, accounted

<sup>38</sup>Hobsbawm, “The Retreat into Extremism,” 12.

<sup>39</sup>Hobsbawm, “Labour: Rump or Rebirth?,” 9.

<sup>40</sup>Hobsbawm, “Labour’s Lost Millions,” 7; Hobsbawm, “Labour: Rump or Rebirth?,” 11.

<sup>41</sup>Hobsbawm, “Labour: Rump or Rebirth?,” 11.

for most of the national press coverage of his developing critique. *The Guardian*, as mentioned above, was especially active in picking up on Hobsbawm's analyses and publishing them on the eve of Labour Party conferences. However, it was not only the liberal and centre-left press that provided coverage, and this helped substantiate his argument as the more "realistic," reinforcing the persuasiveness of his critique. The conservative press also picked up and disseminated Hobsbawm's ideas, a notable achievement considering how they otherwise generally ignored the left press and its ideas.

Although many right-wing journalists still saw *Marxism Today* as part of the "international Communist conspiracy" in 1982,<sup>42</sup> this had begun to change as early as 1984. In that year, for instance, one of the United Kingdom's most conservative newspapers, *The Daily Telegraph*, asked if "Professor Hobsbawm's logic alone [would] be sufficient to offset" the "Trotskyist militant mood," i.e., the "class politics" of traditionalists in both the CPGB and the Labour Party. Such ideas were seen to be gaining ground on the Left "out of sheer despair."<sup>43</sup> As one of the most public of Communist intellectuals, Hobsbawm was taken as an example of the Communist Party's "reasonableness" and contrasted with Labour's "radical extremes." "Large sections" of Labour were thought to be to the left of the CPGB. Moreover, such militants lacked both the latter's discipline and commitment to the parliamentary road, reversing the usual portrayal of Labour and Communist parties as, respectively, supporters and enemies of parliamentary democracy.<sup>44</sup> Hobsbawm's writings thus interested the national press because his critique of the Left came from the Left, which helped to reinforce the Right's own rhetorical constructions and political denunciations of the "loony Left."

Right-wing dailies continued to express a contradictory mix of "pleasant surprise" at *Marxism Today*'s and Hobsbawm's "moderate" stance and/or suspicion of their underlying motives throughout the 1980s. *The Times* was typically similarly schizophrenic. Some of its journalists could not get beyond a superficial, McCarthyite idea of Hobsbawm and *Marxism Today*, condemning Kinnock for his association with the "Marxist" Hobsbawm.<sup>45</sup> Others proved more thoughtful: *The Times*'s political editor suggested that Tony Benn and Arthur Scargill should "ponder" the miners' strike roundtable published in the April 1985 issue of *Marxism Today*,<sup>46</sup> while a headline in the *Sunday Times* three years later pointed out that "Clear-eyed Communists Show Kinnock the Way."<sup>47</sup> "Realism" clearly had an audience on the Right.

<sup>42</sup>CND was denounced as a "Soviet front" because one leading member wrote for *Marxism Today*. "Sheep's Clothing," *The Times*, 29 November 1982.

<sup>43</sup>"Swept into the Rapids," *Telegraph*, 25 February 1984.

<sup>44</sup>P. Paterson, "A Lesson From the Communists," *Sunday Times*, 20 January 1985.

<sup>45</sup>Digby Anderson, "Realistic, Ambitious — and Extreme," *The Times*, 1 October 1985.

<sup>46</sup>Michael Jones, "Fratricide on the Hard-Left," *The Times*, 31 March 1985.

<sup>47</sup>Brian Walden, "Clear-eyed Communists Show Kinnock the Way," *Sunday Times*, 4 December 1988.



This ostensible last issue of *Marxism Today* in December 1991 was a celebration of the contributions and impact made by Eric Hobsbawm, among others, to the debates on the Left during the late 1970s and 1980s. A one-off issue of *Marxism Today* was published in October 1998, with Hobsbawm, Stuart Hall, and other former contributors critiquing Tony Blair’s New Labour government, despite Hall referring to Blair as the “*Marxism Today* candidate” in 1994. Photo by *Media Technology Resources, Wilfrid Laurier University*.

*Conclusion*

The rhetoric of realistic Marxism that Hobsbawm introduced to the debates over the future of the labour movement became a key part of a rhetorical strategy countering the arguments of his opponents on the Left. Working from a position of strength as both a CPGB member and a Marxist scholar, Hobsbawm was able to launch his views on a direction for the Labour Party by drawing upon his knowledge and background of Marxist and Communist theory and history. In addition, his rhetorical style involved the invention of vivid, plausible metaphors that resonated with his audiences, undermining his opponents' arguments. Through his constant invocations of "being realistic," Hobsbawm was able to present his traditional Left critics as "unrealistic." By situating them in such a position, and helped by the dissemination of both his arguments and his metaphors across the Left by *Marxism Today* as well as both the key centre-left daily newspaper, *The Guardian*, and the conservative daily press, the rhetoric of "realistic Marxism" came to dominate debates over the future of Labour. Ultimately it prepared the ground for the "third way" policies of Tony Blair and New Labour once traditional beliefs of the Labour Party were discarded.

*I would like to thank the editor, Bryan Palmer, and the anonymous reviewers of my article for their valuable comments and suggestions.*

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