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Looking for a Dream, Surviving a Time of Nightmares: Eric Hobsbawm, *Marxism Today* and the Resignification of Antifascism During Thatcher's Time

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Abstract

In 1979 Margaret Thatcher came to power in the United Kingdom inaugurating the rise of neoliberalism. In the pages of *Marxism Today* an intense debate took place about the strategy of the Labour Party to defeat Thatcher and Thatcherism. The author aims to show how the famous communist historian Eric Hobsbawm appealed to his own memories of the French Popular Front and the antifascist movement to give ideological content to the fight against Thatcherism on two points. First, Thatcherism as a new international threat similar to fascism in the 1930s. Second, by appealing emotionally to his own experiences during the 1930s in order to show readers how antifascism could work to unite the diverse progressive forces ranged against Thatcher. By doing so, Hobsbawm and the contributors to *Marxism Today* would reshape antifascism based on two ideals: the unity of the majority, in particular, the unity of the working class, against the forces of reaction. Second, the strength of unity to articulate policies for the emancipation of the working class.

Keywords

United Kingdom – antifascism – Thatcherism – Labour Party – *Marxism Today* – Communism – Eric Hobsbawm (1917–2012)

In *The Karl Marx Memorial Lecture* in 1977, Eric Hobsbawm addressed his audience on the subject of 'The Forward March of Labour Halted', initiating an intense debate about the prospects of the labour movement and the Labour Party. It was republished in *Marxism Today*, the leading journal of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), in 1978. By 1978 the Labour Party was still in government, with James Callaghan as the Prime Minister. However, the government was suffering from an intense crisis, both economic and political. In 1978, the unions went on strike, ushering in the famous 'Winter of Discontent', that lasted until 1979. The power of the unions, the weakness of the government, and the consequences of both the strike and the actions of the Prime Minister, exacerbated the feeling of decline and crisis in British society. The political right and Thatcher were able to portray this crisis as requiring a particular type of decisive intervention.¹ The writing was already on the wall for the Callaghan government, which would fall in May 1979, when Margaret Thatcher's landslide victory gave the Conservatives a strong majority in parliament.² The election result confirmed the feeling that Labour should change to fit the new times. For Hobsbawm, the episode confirmed his hypothesis that both the broader labour movement and the Labour Party were in trouble. Changes needed to be made. And yet that need had been clear for a long time without changes being made.

In his political interventions since 1977, 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 'Hard Left' within both the Labour Party, as well as the CPGB. 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'.³ Second, Hobsbawm used his authority as a long time-loyal communist, as a renowned historian and as someone who had personally experienced the key political events of the 1930s (Weimar, the French Popular Front, the antifascist

1 Colin Hay, 'Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the "Winter of Discontent"', *Sociology* 30, no. 2 (1996): 254. For an overview see: Tara Martin López, *The Winter of Discontent: Myth, Memory, and History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014).

2 A reference of how sometimes factors confluences at the same time, see: Christian Caryl, *Strange Rebels: 1979 and the Birth of the 21st Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), specially chapter 12: The lady, 155–168.

3 For an analysis of the rhetoric employed by Hobsbawm, see: Herbert Pimlott, 'From "Old Left" to "New Labour"?' Eric Hobsbawm and the Rhetoric of "Realistic Marxism", *Labour/Le Travail* 56 (2005): 175–197.

moment) to argue and justify his political strategies such as the need for unity, the need for alliances and the need to reconsider the primary strategy of both the Labour Party and the CPGB. Third, he was able to draw on important figures in communist history such as Marx, Lenin, Dimitrov or Togliatti, first, to appeal emotionally to his readers and, second, to use authoritative figures to justify the need for change. Finally, many articles were printed in the mainstream press including both centre-left and right-wing newspapers – most of them in *The Guardian* a centre-left newspaper – reaching a wider audience beyond the pages of *Marxism Today*.

My purpose in this article is to offer new ways to understand not only Hobsbawm's political commitment by studying his political interventions from 1977–78 to the fall of Communism in 1989, but also to show how he reframed his experiences in the antifascism movement to take on Thatcherism as a new international threat as Hitler and Nazism were in the 1930s. By constantly mobilising to his own youthful experiences in the French Popular Front, the Weimar Republic, his authority as an historian of working-class movements and his constant loyalty to the communist cause, he appealed for a renewal of the Labour and Communist movement. This entailed advocating the need for a broad alliance and cross-class unity to defeat Thatcher and Thatcherism, similar to the French Popular Front in the 1930s to stop fascism in France. I argue that Hobsbawm's political interventions showed the transformations of British intellectual life from a culture centred on the 'Universal Intellectual' to one in which the 'Specific Intellectual' held primacy. The former model corresponds at the collective level, to the Marxist figure of the proletariat, or working class, as the collective historical subject or 'bearer of the Universal' – the people who shape the course of history. From the 1970s a general feeling set in that it was no longer possible to talk about social classes in the same way as in the past. In parallel, there was a shift of a hegemonic intellectual model from the universal to the 'specific' intellectual. The latter could no longer claim to be writing, speaking or acting on behalf of all humans, but, at best, to be the spokesperson for specific, clearly, demarcated domains of social activity.⁴ Hobsbawm, while appealing to the whole left in the UK, was no longer acting as a 'universal intellectual', but as an historian whose authority in working-class history and as a life-long-committed communist who lived through the 1920s and 1930s, the rise of fascism and the anti-fascism moment allowed him to justify his political views and, thus, appeal to his readers for changes in the strategy of both the Labour and the CPGB.

4 Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Role of Intellectuals Today,' *Theoria* 49, no. 99 (2002): 1–6.

The Left Before Thatcherism

The case of the UK was no different; in fact, the feeling of crisis was more generalised than in other countries. The economic performance in the UK in the Golden Age might have seemed outstanding, but in comparison with the rest of Western countries it was less impressive. As Charles Bean and Nicholas Crafts have shown, in the years 1950–1973, British economic growth appears to have been exceptionally disappointing when seen from this perspective.⁵ After 1973, the UK faced severe adverse shocks to both aggregate supply and aggregate demand, producing a pessimistic prognosis of the future amongst many people.⁶

The 1970s is considered a decade of crisis in the UK. This decade is considered by some historians as the moment when many people started to mistrust politicians on a large scale.⁷ Alwyn W. Turner explains how the 1970s was actually a moment of several crises: of natural resources, about race and immigration, about terrorism and environmental abuse, about Britain's position within Europe, and of nationalism within Britain. Crises 'in fact about everything from street violence to class war and even to paedophile porn. It was a time when the certainties of the post-war political consensus were destroyed and it was unclear what would emerge to replace them.'⁸ Perhaps expressions such as 'The winds of Change' used by former Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in 1960, 'Something is in the Air' or 'Labour isn't working' from Margaret Thatcher's campaign in 1979 best captured the emotional state of the British people during the 1970s. As Emily Robinson, Camilla Schofield, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson in their influential article suggested, in the 1970s 'many were expressing desires for greater personal autonomy and self-determination . . . this was an important trend across the post-war decades, and of particular importance to understanding the 1970s.' They even argued that 'this popular individualism was not the result of

5 Charles Bean and Nicholas Crafts, 'British Economic Growth since 1945: Relative Economic Decline ... and Renaissance?' in *Economic Growth in Europe since 1945*, ed. Nicholas Crafts and Gianni Toniolo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 146.

6 Camilla Schofield has argued how the upheavals of the late 1960s and early 1970s destabilised the coherence of the postwar era helping the rise of Thatcherite ideas. See: Camilla Schofield, *Enoch Powell and the Making of Postcolonial Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

7 Bean and Crafts, 'British Economic,' 149.

8 Alwyn W. Turner, *Crisis? What Crisis? Britain in the 1970s* (London: Aurum, 2008), 8. For a critical account of the 'consensus' approach, see: Harriet Jones, Michael Kandiah, ed., *The Myth of Consensus: New Views on British History, 1945–64* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996).

Thatcher; if anything, it was a cause of Thatcherism.⁹ Moreover, the succession of governments from 1970 to 1979 – with the Conservative Heath (1970–1974) and his famous U-Turn from greater liberalisation to protectionism, the return of the Labour Party with Wilson in 1974, and then in 1976 of James Callaghan, and the failures of both parties¹⁰ – gave opportunity to Thatcher to restore ‘to the British people their “national identity”’.¹¹

The context of the UK is crucial to explain the Communist Party of Great Britain’s ideology, cultural influences and strategic positions in order to elucidate Hobsbawm’s positions from 1977 onwards. Briefly, the CPGB was never politically relevant. The first-past-the-post electoral system and the predominance of the Labour Party made it impossible for the CPGB to achieve any political clout. However, at certain times, it was relevant in terms of culture. Usually this coincided with high tides in the influence of communism internationally.

In this sense, from the 1940s onwards, the CPGB developed different strands of Marxism that became relevant in the 1970s.¹² As Dennis Dworkin argues, three moments can be discerned within this tradition: The Popular Front of the 1930s and 1940s – when Hobsbawm’s politics were formed; the New Left movement and the campaign for Nuclear Disarmament of the late 1950s and early 1960s; and, finally, the countercultural and student politics of 1968 and the feminist and the anti-racist politics of the 1970s. These three traditions clashed in the crisis that began in the 1980s in the aftermath of Thatcher’s victory.¹³ First, the practice of the Communist Party Historians’ Group (1946–1956) bore the imprint of two political moments. On the one hand, it conceived of itself as spearheading a Popular Front, a broad coalition of progressive historians

9 Emily Robinson, Camilla Schofield, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson, ‘Telling Stories about Post-War Britain: Popular Individualism and the “Crisis” of the 1970s,’ *Twentieth Century British History* 28, no. 2 (2017): 268.

10 See: John Ramsden, *The Winds of Change: Macmillan to Heath, 1957–1975* (London: Longman, 1996); Dominic Sandbrook, *State of Emergency: The Way We Were: Britain, 1970–1974* (London: Penguin, 2011); and Dominic Sandbrook, *Seasons in the Sun: The Battle for Britain, 1974–1979* (London: Allan Lane, 2012).

11 Peter Mandler, *The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair* (New Haven: Yale University press, 2006), 231.

12 For an overview of the history of the CPGB before 1945, see: Matthew Worley, *Class against Class: The Communist Party in Britain between the Wars* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002); Noreen Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927–1941* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985); Nina Fishman, *The British Communist Party and the Trade Unions, 1933–45* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1995); and Andrew Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920–43* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

13 Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 3–5.

combating reactionary tendencies in historiography. Its thinking was simultaneously constrained by the sectarianism already present in the 1930s but accentuated by the Cold War's polarisation of intellectual and political discourse. The influence of the Popular Front's strategy had an important impact on their vision of politics and history and deeply influenced their perspective on the proper relationship between theory and practice.¹⁴

Second, the rise of the Cultural Studies and the New Left in the 1950s by the hand of people like Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall whose influence did not come from the Popular Front context. They saw social processes as a complex result of economic, political and cultural determinations, and they insisted that none of these determinations was primary.¹⁵ The Second New Left was influenced by the impact of the crisis of the 'grand narrative' and the inability of emancipatory projects like Marxism to organise peoples' belief system in the conditions of late modernity. The energies unleashed by the influence of '1968' fragmented the left into a series of interconnected movements: feminism, gay rights, community activism, environmental politics, anti-racism, etc.¹⁶ The latter exemplified the problems of the CPGB in adapting to the new changes. In 1967, a far-right political party the National Front (NF) was founded, whose racist ideas would be further fuelled by Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech the following year.¹⁷ While the CPGB looked well-placed to put itself at the head of anti-racist and anti-fascist campaigns, it failed to capitalise on the protests generated by these developments. Spurred into action by the NF's advances, many local anti-fascist organisations were formed from 1973 onwards (for example the Campaign Against Racism and Fascism). The NF was directly opposed on the streets by Trotskyists from the International Socialist/Socialist Workers' Party (IS/SWP), for instance in the Battle of Lewisham in 1977, when demonstrators from the SWP broke the NF march.¹⁸ While the CPGB's line was to forge alliances between different groups to challenge the NF

14 Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism*, 10–13.

15 *Ibid.*, 60.

16 Geoff Andrews, 'The Three New Lefts and Their Legacies,' in *New Left-Right and Beyond: Taking the Sixties Seriously*, ed. Geoff Andrews, Richard Cockett, Alan Hooper and Michael Williams (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 67.

17 Alex Carter, 'The Dog That Didn't Bark? Assessing the Development of "Cumulative Extremism" between Fascists and Anti-Fascists in the 1970s,' in *Tomorrow Belongs to Us: The British Far Right since 1967*, ed. Nigel Copesey and Matthew Worley (New York: Routledge, 2017), 91.

18 From the mobilisations against the NF arose the Anti-Nazi League (ANL) in 1977, which was considered to be the largest extra-parliamentary movements since the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in the early 1960s, and a key example of anti-fascist unity. Nigel Copesey, *Anti-Fascism in Britain* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 115.

legally with bans and re-routing of marches, the more militant members of the IS/SWP sought to challenge them in the streets, as exemplified at Lewisham.¹⁹

The CPGB in the 1970s found itself completely divided because of the impact of these new movements, especially the second new left of 1968. Additionally, in 1971 Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* were first translated into English, and strongly influenced some members of the party. The influence of Gramscian thought in the CPGB was defined by three main areas: first, a critique of the economics of the party's mainstream strategy, and an alternative emphasis on ideology and culture. Second, a redefinition of the meaning of class and its relationship to 'new social forces', and consideration of the resulting political implications. Third, and finally, a prefigurative strategy which would facilitate the transition to socialism.²⁰ This influence of Gramsci's ideas provided a theoretical justification for different kinds of alliances between the working class and new social movements. A major consequence of these attempts at renewal was a departure from Leninism and a greater assimilation into the political culture of Labourism. For many of the Gramscians, 'left unity' could be strengthened by coming to terms with the Labour members, something that many in the CPGB saw as a retreat into reformism.²¹

In short, by 1977 the CPGB was broadly divided between the reformist wing that was an informal coalition of 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. 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 organised working class, and close connections with the Soviet Union as the supposed living embodiment of socialism.²² Neither side could command a majority of the membership. The nearest expression of any perceived coming together of both tendencies was the adoption of the 'broad democratic alliance' strategy of the CPGB at its 1977 Congress, a partial recognition of the influence of Gramsci in seeking a coalition between the working class and its allies.²³

19 James Eaden and David Renton, *The Communist Party of Great Britain since 1920* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 166–167.

20 Geoff Andrews, *Endgames and New Times: The Final Years of British Communism, 1964–1991* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2004), 144.

21 Andrews, *Endgames*, 105–108.

22 Francis Beckett, *Enemy Within: The Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party* (London: Merlin Press, 1999), 171.

23 Andrews, 'The Three New Lefts', 76.

From 'The Forward March of Labour Halted' to the Second Victory of Margaret Thatcher (1977–1983)

As mentioned above, the publication of 'Forward March of the Labour Halted?' in September 1978, first given as a lecture in 1977, opened an intense debate about the prospects of the working class in Great Britain. Hobsbawm argued that a transformation of the working class and of capitalism had led to new relations of forces: capitalism had strengthened itself while the forces of the working class had been split. The expected revolution had not happened,²⁴ 'the forward march of labour and the labour movement, which Marx predicted, appears to have come to a halt in this century about twenty-five to thirty years ago.'²⁵ In his account:

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. There is no evidence that it will do so automatically. But if the labour and socialist movement is to recover its soul, its dynamism, and its historical initiative, we, as Marxists, must do what Marx would certainly have done: to recognize 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.²⁶

His thesis generated an intense debate in the pages of *Marxism Today* that picked up on his suggestions, first, to broaden out the concept of the working class to the more general and ambiguous notion of 'the people',²⁷ and, second, to unite the left in both the Labour Party and the CPGB to maximise the electoral result in the forthcoming elections. Important figures in the British Communist Party such as Kenneth Gill, Peter Carter, Royden Harrison, Kevil Halpin and Digby Jack made interventions in response.²⁸ The latter considered

24 Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Forward March of Labour Halted?' *Marxism Today*, September 1978, reprinted in Eric Hobsbawm, ed., *Politics for a Rational Left: Political Writing 1977–1988* (London: Verso, 1989), 13 and 15.

25 Hobsbawm, 'The Forward,' 9.

26 *Ibid.*, 22.

27 This was done following the approval of the concept 'Broad democratic alliance' by the CPGB in 1977 in the programme 'The road to British Socialism' in 1977 to concede some political space to the reformist wing.

28 See these contributions in Martin Jacques and Francis Mulhern, ed., *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* (London: NLB in association with *Marxism Today*, 1981).

that Hobsbawm's proposal neglected the centrality of the working class, which the CPGB considered central 'to our concept of a broad democratic alliance,²⁹ and while struggle in all and every possible way against capitalism is essential their orientation should always be towards the working class.'³⁰

In the midst of this debate, in May 1979 Margaret Thatcher won the general elections. In September 1979, Hobsbawm published his verdict on the 1979 election in *Marxism Today* – originally entitled 'A response' to the debate engendered by his 'The Forward of the Labour Halted?' that had been continued in the pages of the journal since December 1978. Following the same line argued before, he suggested that unity of 'action by socialists and Communists are indeed better than they have been for many years', but 'the chief obstacle [to uniting them was] probably the sectarianism of some smaller groups of the unfortunately fragmented left.'³¹ In this article Hobsbawm started to develop an overt critique of the people he considered to represent this 'sectarianism' – those who would not deviate in strategy from a focus on the classic idea of the centrality of the working class as the main and only political subject, in contrast to Hobsbawm's proposal for greater openness to include sectors beyond the working class.

After the elections, the Labour Party underwent a process of renewing its leadership. Whoever it elected would have the opportunity to challenge Thatcher at the next General Election. However, what came to pass in these years in the Labour Party favoured a second victory of the Conservatives in 1983. On the left, James Callaghan, the former Prime Minister, was dismissed from his post in 1980, thus opening up a renovation of the direction of the party, whereby Michael Foot won the leadership against Denis Healey.³² From that moment, the Labour Party moved closer to the most radical and leftist militants inside the Party who did not favour broad left-wing unity.³³ This, in

29 In 1977, inspired by the Eurocommunists inside the CPGB, the Party approved a new plan of 'The Road to British Socialism' where they defended the strategy of broad democratic alliance which to many in the CPGB resemble the years of the antifascist and Popular Front. Andrews, *Endgames*, 15–17.

30 Digby Jack, 'Discussion: The Forward March of Labour Halted?' *Marxism Today*, April 1979, reprinted in Martin Jacques and Francis Mulhern, ed., *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* (London: NLB in association with *Marxism Today*, 1981), 45.

31 Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Verdict of 1979 Election,' *Marxism Today*, September 1989, reprinted in Eric Hobsbawm, *Politics for a Rational Left: Political Writing 1977–1988* (London: Verso, 1989), 25.

32 James E. Cronin, *New Labour's Pasts: The Labour Party and its Discontents* (Harlow: Pearson/Longman, 2004), 392.

33 See: Andrew Hindmoor, *New Labour at the Centre: Constructing Political Space* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

turn, provoked the most moderate members of the party to found a new political party. In January 1981 the ‘Gang of Four’ former Labour ministers – Roy Jenkins, Shirley Williams, David Owen and Bill Rodgers – issued the ‘Limehouse Declaration’, calling for a ‘realignment’ of British politics. Two months later they formed the Social Democratic Party (SDP), which was to work in alliance with the Liberals.³⁴ The unity of the Labour Party was broken as a new political party situated in the centre of the political space was born. By the end of 1981, the Labour Party was in disarray between the most moderate members and the leftist militants led by Tony Benn. The strong contradictions within the Labour Party, and internal divisions over its strategy, would play a key role in its defeat at the next election.

In September 1979, Sam Aaronovitch (1919–1998) a well-known economist, academic and member of the CPGB, close to Eurocommunist circles and critical of the orthodoxy inside the party, opened a discussion in *Marxism Today* about the prospects of a broad democratic alliance. In the subsequent debate, Hobsbawm’s opinion was published in July 1981, where he laid out his strategy more clearly. His main purpose was to convince readers of his strategy to delegitimise the hard left of the Labour Party that was winning terrain in the party with the victory of Michael Foot and Tony Benn. First, he claimed that the nature of the division has ‘brought electoral defeat, followed by what is probably the most reactionary government of Britain this century, and certainly (barring Turkey) the most reactionary government in Europe at the present moment.’³⁵ The pressing problem was ‘how to get the British people, who reject Thatcherism utterly, to turn to Labour again.’³⁶ He argued that while the cause of socialism ‘is as strong as ever’, it needed to ‘be argued in a new way, with much clearer proposals concerning the sort of society we want and what socialism can achieve, rather than a repetition of old slogans which, however valid, no longer carry the same conviction.’³⁷

Hobsbawm was looking forward to the modernisation of the Labour Party’s strategy by broadening and diversifying the electoral base from a working-class perspective to one of the ‘people’. At that moment this was a distinctly polemical statement, especially coming from a Marxist whose core subject was the

34 Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, *SDP: The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 89–90.

35 Eric Hobsbawm, ‘The Debate on “The Forward March of Labour Halted? (1981)”’, in Eric Hobsbawm, *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* (London: Verso Books, 1981), reprinted in Eric Hobsbawm, *Politics for a Rational Left: Political Writing 1977–1988* (London: Verso, 1989), 29.

36 Hobsbawm, ‘The Debate’, 34.

37 *Ibid.*, 37.

working class. Nonetheless, many authors like Stuart Hall, Digby Jacks, and Sam Aaronovitch,³⁸ agreed on the need to appeal to a wide range of forces. In this text, Hobsbawm was referring to the context of 1981–82 that saw the rise of neo-socialist governments in France, Sweden, Greece and Spain, all of which appealed to the ‘people’ rather than the working class. The best example was France with the renovated *Parti Socialiste* [PS; Socialist Party] under the leadership of François Mitterrand.³⁹ In Hobsbawm’s view, these experiences were an instance of ‘the first condition of labour’s revival, namely, “a broad party” leading a broad movement.’⁴⁰ In ‘The State of the Left in Europe’, published in October 1982 in *Marxism Today*, we find the same approach to the problem again. The victory of the left in France in 1981 was ‘a dramatic proof that far-reaching political changes were possible.’ In his view: it is impossible to deny that the position of the Right in the countries of Europe has been weakened over the past ten years. Fewer governments have moved sharply to the right. Unfortunately, Britain is one.⁴¹ In supporting his arguments, Hobsbawm employed, first, the invaluable position that he had lived during the years of the French Popular Front and, second, the fact that, as Geoff Andrews has shown, from the 1970s there was a rediscovery of the spirit of antifascism within the CPGB.⁴² Using these two cards, he told his readers that ‘we must begin with the obvious fact that world capitalism is in its deepest crisis since the 1930s’,⁴³ but also, history can teach us how to think alternatives:

The large movements of antifascist unity were not merely formed around the nucleus of the Labour movements, nor did they only express the need to unite against the threat which fascism posed for the entire Left, from liberal democrats to communists. They also mobilised for major social changes, for the hope of a new and better society, under the leadership and slogans of the parties of the working class.⁴⁴

38 Sam Aaronovitch, ‘The Working Class and the Broad Democratic Alliance,’ *Marxism Today*, September 1979, 289–292. Stuart Hall, ed., *The Politics of Thatcherism* (London: Lawrence and Wishart in association with *Marxism Today*, 1983); and Jack, ‘Discussion.’

39 See: Philip Short, *Mitterrand: A Study in Ambiguity* (London: Vintage Books, 2014); Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Political Traditions in Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Jacques Julliard, *Les gauches françaises: histoire, politique et imaginaire, 1762–2012* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012).

40 Hobsbawm, ‘The Debate,’ 38.

41 Eric Hobsbawm, ‘The State of the Left in Western Europe,’ *Marxism Today*, October 1982, 8.

42 Andrews, *Endgames*, 17.

43 Hobsbawm, ‘The State,’ 9.

44 *Ibid.*, 10.

Here it is relevant that in Hobsbawm's rhetoric, he ambiguously suggested Thatcherism was a threat similar to fascism. He did not mean that Thatcher was equivalent to Hitler but, from a communist perspective, the Thatcherite project represented a radical challenge and a threat to workers' rights. Thus, the rhetoric of comparing Thatcherism as a new threat similar to fascism at the international level in the 1930s comes as no surprise. In fact, this was a common claim on some parts of the left during these years.⁴⁵ One of the hypotheses to define Thatcher was to suggest that she represented a new form of fascism.⁴⁶

In Hobsbawm's political imagination, Mitterrand's strategy for victory resembled that of the 1930s when in the midst of a huge crisis, the French Radical Party, the French Socialist Party and the French Communist Party were able to assemble the French Popular Front, transcending their differences and winning a key election in May 1936.⁴⁷ Hobsbawm's comparison made important emotional connections not only with his own life, but also with that of his readers, many of whom – especially in the case of *Marxism Today* – had memories of the 1930s, and were liable to be interpellated through reference to that experience. Antifascism was reframed as a strategy to fight Thatcherism. In Hobsbawm's view, this necessitated the unity of the different strands of the left and the centre in the political spectrum.

In 1982, an unexpected event was to change British politics and the future of Thatcherism. In March of that year, the Argentinian generals launched an invasion of a British colony, the Falklands, which meant almost nothing to British society before the incursion.⁴⁸ The Falklands War, as it was known, was the defining event of 1982. It strengthened Thatcher's government, it split the opposition and unleashed an explosion of patriotism unseen since the Second World War. Inflated references to Suez and the Second World War contributed to a sense that the Falklands had a special kind of historical significance.⁴⁹

45 A good examples is the tv-show 'Spitting Image' that had a section where Thatcher's neighbour was Hitler and she used to ask him 'advices' on how to deal with some political problems.

46 Stuart Hall was very critical with this approach. To see his views and some of the critiques: Jacques Martin and Stuart Hall, ed., *The politics of Thatcherism* (London: Lawrence and Wishart in association with *Marxism Today*, 1983).

47 Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy 1934–38* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

48 Max Hastings and Simon Jenkins, *The Battle for the Falklands* (London: Pan, 1983), 17–18.

49 Richard Vinen, *Thatcher's Britain: The Politics and Social Upheaval of the 1980s* (London, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 145–146.

As Dominic Sandbrook asserted recently: '[It] was a genuine turning point, the first for forty years. It banished the ghosts of Suez, and marked the end of an era defined by post-imperial introspection.'⁵⁰ The unexpected patriotism that it generated took many intellectuals on the left by surprise, including Hobsbawm.⁵¹

The problem facing a possible Labour victory after the Falkland Wars was the revival of support for the Conservatives just one year before the elections, which were to be held in June 1983. In January 1983, Hobsbawm wrote about this defining event of British politics in *Marxism Today*. In 'Falklands Fallout', Hobsbawm's first conclusion was that it had everything to do with the crisis that Britain has been living through from the late 1960s onward.⁵² Nevertheless, his main point was how Thatcher and Thatcherites were able to manage patriotism, which Hobsbawm considered a 'politically brilliant operation'.⁵³ The war proved the strength and the political potential of patriotism, while Marxists 'haven't found it easy to come to terms with working-class patriotism in general and English or British patriotism in particular.'⁵⁴ From this moment, the question of nationalism would again be an important political concern in Hobsbawm's analysis.⁵⁵ Hobsbawm's first reaction was to recover a key element of his youthful commitment to the Popular Front: to recover patriotism for the left: 'in the antifascist period of the 1930s, the Communist international launched the call to wrest away national traditions from the bourgeoisie, to capture the national flag so long waved by the right . . . As the anti-fascist war

50 Dominic Sandbrook, *Who Dares Wins: Britain, 1979–1982* (UK: Allen Lane, 2019), 838.

51 In his first public opinion on the Falklands War, in a speech delivered to *Marxism Today*'s 'Moving Left Show', on 19 November 1982, his main concern was 'the ease with which the Thatcherites captured the patriotic upsurge which initially in no sense was confined to the political conservatives let alone to the Thatcherites one'. Eric Hobsbawm, 'Moving Left Show, 9-11-82,' Papers of Professor Eric Hobsbawm, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, MSS. 937-4-3-2-14.

52 Eric Hobsbawm, 'Falklands Fallout,' *Marxism Today*, January 1983, reprinted in Eric Hobsbawm, *Politics for a Rational Left: Political Writing 1977–1988* (London: Verso, 1989), 53.

53 Hobsbawm, 'Falklands Fallout,' 54.

54 *Ibid.*, 57.

55 While it is true that Hobsbawm was always against nationalism and it was present in many works before 1982, his best known analysis of nationalism dated after 1983. Moreover, the Falklands War would strength Hobsbawm opposition to nationalism and patriotism. For a brief analysis of Hobsbawm's attitudes to nationalism since the eighties, see: John Breuille, 'Eric Hobsbawm: Nationalism and Revolution,' *Nations and Nationalism* 21, no. 4 (2015): 630–657.

showed quite dramatically, the combination of patriotism with a genuine people's war proved to be politically radicalizing to an unprecedented degree.⁵⁶

This analysis not only fitted with the resurgence of antifascism in the CPGB, but also with Eurocommunism's proposals to construct national strategies. History became the lens through which this change appeared justified. A second interesting element is Hobsbawm's attempt to translate his own political references from France into the British context.

Hobsbawm's political formation was strengthened in the years of antifascism and in France, where Jacobinism and patriotism were key elements of Communists' references, especially during the 1930s.⁵⁷ Life experiences and the past become a source of knowledge as he stated: 'It is difficult to convey this in 1982, but as an historian I must remind you of it. It is dangerous to leave patriotism exclusively to the right.'⁵⁸ Again we see the reframing of the antifascist culture of the 1930s and the sense of portraying Thatcherism as a similar thread to Hitler in the 1930s.⁵⁹ As Hobsbawm reiterated: 'Yes, there is a danger [in patriotism]. As a boy I lived some formative and very young years in the Weimar Republic, among another people who felt themselves defeated, losing their old certainties and their old moorings, relegated in the international league and pitied by foreigners. Add depression and mass unemployment to that and what you got then was Hitler.'⁶⁰

On 9 June 1983, a general election was held in the UK. As expected, Thatcher obtained a second majority in parliament that consolidated her mandate to pursue her reforms. This second victory would spell the end of the left faction in the Labour Party with the ousting of Michael Foot, the Labour Party's candidate in that election. The demoralisation of Labour's supporters that had begun in the aftermath of the Falklands War, the strength and fear of the SDP which became the third largest party at only 700,000 votes short of the Labour Party's tally (although not close in MPs, due to the electoral system) and the election of a new leader – Neil Kinnock – who favoured a reinvention

56 Hobsbawm, 'Falklands Fallout,' 60.

57 See Julliard, *Les gauches françaises*. Later on, in 1985, Hobsbawm would make this connection in his lectures about nationalism, later on collected in a book: Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1750: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992).

58 Hobsbawm, 'Falklands Fallout,' 60.

59 In the interview I aforementioned, Hobsbawm said that he thought Thatcherism was not perhaps 'semi-fascist but it was maybe taking a semi-fascist direction'. Papers of Professor Eric Hobsbawm, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, MSS. 937-4-3-2-14.

60 Hobsbawm, 'Falklands Fallout,' 61.

of Labour from the right-wing, would open a new era in Labour debates.⁶¹ The defeat encouraged many in the Labour Party to accept the need to resignify the party's strategy alongside many others who had previously refused. From 1983 to 1992 many of the pillars of what would come to be New Labour were erected.

From the Second Victory of Thatcher to the Collapse of Communism

In the aftermath of the 1983 election, the October edition of *Marxism Today* published two articles: 'The Popular Front Revisited' by Dave Priscott, and 'Labour's Lost Millions' by Eric Hobsbawm that again opened up an intense debate. Both articles are particularly relevant precisely because they came after the elections, when Labour voters were disappointed because of the result. The disastrous electoral result for the Labour Party opened an opportunity to move to the 'centre' of the ideological spectrum, and finally defeat the hard left in both the Labour Party and the CPGB, who Hobsbawm had been battling against publicly since the beginning of the debate in 1978. According to Hobsbawm, there were two reasons why Thatcher won: 'The first is that far too many people in the opposition parties were not seriously trying to defeat Thatcher, whatever their official rhetoric. . . . The second point which must be hammered home is that Thatcherism won because the anti-Thatcher majority was split.'⁶² Here we find some elements of the idea of 'Popular Frontism': Thatcher won because of the division of her opponents. It bears consideration that the next article in the same volume was about the Popular Front. Among Hobsbawm's detractors, many thought that he was implying the need to broker an alliance with the SDP.

For Dave Priscott, an important communist in the CPGB, his article constructed a parallel between the years of the Popular Front, antifascism and the Labour Party under Thatcher: 'how "new" is Thatcherism? Clearly it cannot be equated to Hitlerism! Nevertheless, in its own way, it does represent a major turn to reaction Then, democracy was under challenge from fascism, which was advancing because the working-class was divided within itself and

61 For an overview of the defeat of the left, see: John Goldin, *Hammer of the Left: Defeating Tony Benn, Eric Heffer and Militant in the Battle for the Labour Party* (London: Politico's, 2003). For the left in the Labour Party more broadly, see: Simon Hannah, *A Party with Socialists in It: A history of the Labour Left* (London: Pluto Press, 2018); and Jonathan David and Rohan McWilliam, ed., *Labour and the Left in the 1980s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).

62 Eric Hobsbawm, 'Labour's Lost Millions,' *Marxism Today*, October 1983, 7–9.

isolated from its potential allies. Now democracy is again under fire, with reaction advancing over a deeply divided working class.⁶³

Once again, the ambiguous use of the 1930s had an important political and emotional function in shaking the consciences of the members of the CPGB. As before, it generated replies from personalities from both the Labour Party and the CPGB such as Michael Meacher, Robin Cook and Eric Heffer.⁶⁴ The suggestion to forge an electoral agreement with the SDP and the Alliance was the most controversial in both articles. While at no point did Hobsbawm or Priscott mention that possibility, the words employed, the comparison with the Popular Front and the ambiguity of the anti-Thatcherite forces were interpreted by many readers as such. Hobsbawm replied to the critics in March 1984 with 'Labour: Rump or rebirth?' The main hypothesis was, again, the need to reconsider Labour's strategy and to look for a new Popular Frontism in the 1980s. He seemed to suggest an alliance between Labour and the SDP/Liberal alliance. He suggested that if the 1930s was the moment of unity in the fight against fascism and heralded the greatest advances in the history of the left, something comparable must be done in the 1980s to defend the Welfare State and the people against Thatcherism:

'Labour's Lost Millions' . . . was not a call for a retreat into opportunism and 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 quite essential today, as a mere defence against encroaching reaction. It is that, certainly – but the history of the anti-fascist struggles shows that those purely defensive struggles were the foundation of major advances of the Left – not least in Britain.⁶⁵

In 1985, in the midst of the miners' strike, Hobsbawm published 'Retreat into Extremism' which was very influential. One of the main reasons was the timing: in the face of the likely defeat of the miners,⁶⁶ the disengagement of important sectors of the Labour and CPGB was a unique opportunity to encourage

63 Priscott, 'The Popular Front Revisited,' 25.

64 Michael Meacher, 'Discussion: Labour's Lost Millions,' *Marxism Today*, November 1983, 44; Robin Cook, 'Discussion: Labour's Lost Millions,' *Marxism Today*, November 1983, 44–45; and Eric Heffer, 'Discussion: Labour's Lost Millions,' *Marxism Today*, December 1983, 50–52.

65 Eric Hobsbawm, 'Labour: Rump or Rebirth,' *Marxism Today*, March 1984, 11.

66 See: Owen Jones, *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class* (London: Verso, 2016); Seumas Milne, *The Enemy Within: The Secret War Against the Miners* (London: Verso, 2014); and Raphael Samuel, Barbara Bloomfield and Guy Boanas, *The Enemy Within: Pit Villages and the Miners' Strike of 1984–5* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986).

change. Hobsbawm made a plea for unity: 'For some years, *Marxism Today* has been associated with a particular immediate political strategy for the Left in Britain: a united labour movement in broad alliance with all who can be mobilized against Thatcherite Toryism, which can be seen as, for the moment, the main enemy, and isolated as such.'⁶⁷

He continued with his strategy in contrast to the unrealistic strategy: 'The "road anti-Thatcherite" strategy represents the practical consensus of a lot of people on the left, that this sort of line can set Labour back on its forward march, whereas the strategies pursued on the hard and sectarian left have led to far more defeats and retreats than victories over the last few years.'⁶⁸ Then again, Hobsbawm used important historical moments in communist history to justify his positions, in this case, the politics of 'class against class' – to dismiss the 'Hard Left' who defended traditional working-class politics:

The ultimate in 'class politics' by label was the so-called 'class against class' line of the Communist international in the late 1920s and early 1930s. It was class politics all right, only unfortunately the wrong kind, for it led the international Communist movement to disaster at the very time when the International expected that the world slump of 1929, which it had correctly predicted, would put the preparation of socialist revolution on the immediate agenda. It didn't. It brought Hitler.⁶⁹

It is important to emphasise how Hobsbawm linked the idea that disunity, exemplified by the left and centre in the UK, could bring threats similar to Hitler in the 1980s. As I have shown, a constant in Hobsbawm's analysis of Thatcherism was that it represented a new international threat against workers' rights, and a danger similar to that of Hitler. In contrast, Hobsbawm argued, unity was the key:

Did the line of broad anti-fascist unity which replaced 'class against class' mean the abandonment of class politics? The Communist international did not think so, and neither did those of us who got our political education and experience in the Communist Parties during the 1930s and 1940s. The broad alliance strategy led not only, and almost immediately, to the recovery and growth of the Communist parties in many countries .

67 Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Retreat into Extremism,' *Marxism Today*, April 1985. Reprinted in Eric Hobsbawm, *Politics for a Rational Left: Political Writings 1977–1988* (London: Verso, 1989), 87.

68 Ibid.

69 Hobsbawm, 'The Retreat into Extremism,' 92.

... It undoubtedly produced a political radicalization of the workers and other strata, thus giving British Labour its greatest triumph.⁷⁰

In 1983 the controversial content in Hobsbawm's writings were the insinuation of voting tactically in the next general election between the Labour Party and the SDP-Alliance in every constituency in order to beat Thatcher. This was because the electoral system for a general election in the UK is the single member plurality system (first-past-the post), which means that the party who gets more votes in an individual constituency, wins the MP. A month before the 1987 elections, Hobsbawm published 'Snatching Victory From Defeat', in which he made a direct appeal to vote tactically. As usual, Hobsbawm started by summarising the situation:

Three things have been manifest since 1983, if not before. First, that the defeat of the Thatcher government is the essential task in British politics, and should have absolute priority over any other aim and political calculation Second, it is clear that the Thatcher government is and was, even in 1983, elected as a minority government, against the wishes of 58 per cent of those who voted. Third, we know that the Thatcher government could not have been elected but for the divisions among the opposition, namely between Labour and the Alliance. And if Thatcher has any chance of being re-elected, it is *entirely* due to the continuance of these divisions.⁷¹

There are powerful rhetorical arguments in Hobsbawm's points: 'The essential task', the powerful metaphor of '58 per cent' who voted differently and the 'divisions' that favoured Thatcher's victory. This is a strong argument because of how the electoral system in the UK works, meaning that a party can get a majority of MPs without a majority of votes, as was the case with Thatcher.

The elections were held on the 11 June of 1987. Margaret Thatcher won a third landslide victory, becoming the first Tory in the twentieth century to do so. The consolation for the Labour Party was that it remained the main party of opposition as it resisted the challenge of the SPD-Alliance, which had almost overtaken Labour in the previous elections in vote share. The SDP-Alliance in fact lost support, and Roy Jenkins – one of the founders of the party – lost his

⁷⁰ Ibid., 92–93.

⁷¹ Eric Hobsbawm, 'Snatching Victory From Defeat', *Marxism Today*, May 1987. Reprinted in Eric Hobsbawm, *Politics for a Rational Left: Political Writings 1977–1988* (London: Verso, 1989), 181.

seat, throwing the party into a crisis that would benefit Labour in the future, although this was not yet clear in 1987.⁷² Moreover, shortly after the elections, the debate in the Labour Party moved on to the need to reshape more thoroughly the party's programme, its detailed policies and its image. Eventually it began to take the shape of what was to become Tony Blair's New Labour.⁷³

In October 1987, Hobsbawm analysed the elections in the pages of *Marxism Today*. In his view, there were two positive results of the elections. First, the elimination of the 'fantasy projections of third-party majorities' that 'will establish Labour once again as the major force of opposition, and the party which will head any post-Thatcherite government.' Second, 'the SDP will make the indispensable task of building an anti-Thatcher alliance easier because it will eliminate much of the embittered – and understandable – mutual ill-feeling which stood in the way of collaboration between Labour and anti-Labours.'⁷⁴ Hobsbawm considered two tasks fundamental: to rethink policies and rethink the composition of social forces.⁷⁵ In March 1989, Eric Hobsbawm published a collection of previous articles on the debates about the strategy of the Labour Party since 1977. Entitled *Politics for a Rational Left* and published by Verso Books, a leading left publisher in the UK, the articles 'represent a reasonably consistent point of view on issues which are of continuing relevance in British Politics and in the international debate on the Left.'⁷⁶ The main purposes of this book were twofold: from the national perspective of the UK to analyse the 'nature of Thatcherism' and 'possible ways of mobilizing and uniting the non-Thatcherite majority of the country . . . and about the problem of leadership and policy within the Labour Party.' And from the international perspective, 'the need for the left to reconsider its policies and outlook in a world very different from that envisaged by Marx or Lenin.'⁷⁷ He further justified his position as the writings of someone who belonged to the political tradition 'of the radicals who are also political realists, the tradition of Marx and

72 Cronin, *New Labour's Pasts*, 284–286.

73 Ibid., 291. For a deep analysis of the debate about policy issues inside the Labour Party, see: Colin Hay, *The Political Economy of New Labour: Labouring under False Pretences?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

74 Eric Hobsbawm, 'Out of Wilderness,' *Marxism Today*, October 1987. Reprinted in Eric Hobsbawm, *Politics for a Rational Left: Political Writings 1977–1988* (London: Verso, 1989).

75 Hobsbawm's reflections on these years helped to shape Tony Blair's Third Way. In fact, many considered that Hobsbawm's ideas were very similar to Blair's project. While Hobsbawm would regret in his autobiography that he had helped in the creation of New Labour, he did not consider that his ideas per se shaped New Labour. Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), 7.

76 Eric Hobsbawm, 'Preface,' in *Politics for a Rational Left* (London: Verso, 1999), 2.

77 Ibid., 3.

Lenin, or, correctly, the Communist international's Seventh World Congress: of anti-fascist unity and peoples' fronts.' Thus, this long-standing commitment had taught him how 'strong that emotional appeal is [to accept the need for changes]'.⁷⁸ Overall, the main aim was to rethink socialist analysis and the socialist project that 'may certainly lead to major, far-reaching, and, for some of us, painful modifications of long-held views.'⁷⁹

This collection of essays was Hobsbawm's last attempt to intervene in the debate about the strategy of the Labour Party. The unexpected events of November 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union changed everything. Hobsbawm stopped publishing about the strategy of the Labour Party to focus on what was happening internationally. However, the modernising of the Labour Party did not finish in 1989 and it would continue its path until the election of Tony Blair as party leader and the ascendancy of his New Labour in 1994 and his victory in 1997. But, for Eric Hobsbawm, the transformation of the international order in 1989 signalled the end of how he conceived his political commitment and his political project.

Conclusion

The modernisation of the Labour Party that started in 1979 and which culminated in Tony Blair's New Labour was a long process of debates, changes, problems, criticisms, crises, and personalities. This article elucidates Hobsbawm's role in these debates and, in particular, how he reframed the antifascism of the 1930s to fight Thatcherism in the 1980s.

Borrowing Nigel Copsey and Andrzej Olechnowicz's idea of 'varieties of anti-fascism',⁸⁰ Eric Hobsbawm's appeal to unity not only of the different strands of the Left both in the Labour Party and the CPGB, but also by appealing to the middle class resembled the French Popular Front's strategy and the antifascist moment. Moreover, the comparison of Thatcher with Hitler was intended to connect emotionally with readers and push for a change in the strategies of both parties. It is not that Hobsbawm equated Hitler with Thatcher. Rather, he claimed that Thatcherism represented a threat to the working class, as Hitler did. By considering that you could learn from the past

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid., 4.

80 Nigel Copsey and Andrzej Olechnowicz, ed., *Varieties of Anti-Fascism: Britain in the Inter-War Period* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

and its similarities without positing equivalence, Hobsbawm aimed to mobilise and push for change by juxtaposing Thatcherism and fascism.

Eric Hobsbawm's interventions remain very relevant to our understanding of the role that the concept of antifascism played after 1945; in particular, how it could be reframed as a political strategy beyond the specific moment in which it occurred in the interwar years. Antifascism, in Hobsbawm's view, became a strategy to face any (far) right-wing government like Thatcherism that threatened the pillars of the post-1945 settlement: the values of democracy, the Welfare State and the working class.