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## PRESENTATION / PRÉSENTATION

# From *Primitive Rebels* to *How to Change the World*: Reflections on Two Periods in Anthropology and History

**Gavin Smith**

### Introduction

GAVIN SMITH HAS TAUGHT ANTHROPOLOGY at the University of Toronto since 1975, becoming a full professor in 1986 and reaching official retirement in 2010. He has also been a visiting scholar at the University of Barcelona and is currently co-editor of *Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*, a journal published in the Netherlands. Although his discipline is officially that of anthropology, Smith can be considered more broadly as an intellectual of the left, always integrating his anthropological research with social history and political economy.

At the forefront of Smith's intellectual concerns are political protest and forms of production, subjects he explored in both highland Peru and the shantytowns of Lima in 1972–3 and again in 1981. In 1978–79 he took his interest in petty commodity production and the history of property and labour relations to Valencia, Spain and later did extensive comparative work in Spain, France, and Italy on the relationship between capitalist production processes, the informal economy, regionalism, and politics. Ever moving with the times, his more recent work has explored the role of the European Union and other regulatory regimes in shaping both knowledge about Western Europe and the processes of production, memory, citizenship, and place-making on the ground.

Widely published in such important venues as the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, *Critique of Anthropology*, and other Canadian and Latin American

journals, Smith has contributed greatly to a materialist and historicized anthropology. His Peruvian research culminated in his 1989 monograph *Livelihood and Resistance: Peasants and the Politics of Land in Peru* and his Spanish work in the 2006 book, co-authored with Susana Narotzky, *Immediate Struggles: People, Power, and Place in Rural Spain* (both with the University of California Press). He has compiled his essays in collections whose titles speak for themselves: *Confronting the Present: Towards a Politically Engaged Anthropology* (Berg, 1999) and *Critical Practice – Capitalism, History and Place: Essays In Historical Realism* (Berghahn, forthcoming). He is also co-editor of *Challenging Anthropology: A Critical Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology* (with David Turner, McGraw-Hill, Ryerson, 1979) and of the important collection, *Between History and Histories: The Production of Silences and Commemorations* (with Gerald Sider, University of Toronto Press, 1997), as well as *Rethinking Petty Commodity Production* (1986, with Jonathan Barker). This list of publications is far from exhaustive. All of Smith's writing is characterized by attention to modes of social reproduction at multiple levels of scale, the articulation of power to lived experience, and the role of engaged intellectuals.

The talk published here, on the occasion of Smith's retirement, illustrates why Gavin has been such an arresting presence in the department at Toronto and in the profession more generally – a scholar who is forceful, witty, erudite, elegant, personal, passionate, and uncompromising. It would be impossible to exaggerate Gavin's influence as a teacher, colleague, and mentor and as an intellectual and professional presence in anthropology more widely. Gavin Smith has been a charismatic force, moral visionary, and guide for generations of students, many of whom have gone on to write and research in the particular tradition of critical social science that he helped to establish in Canada and that he energetically nurtured for more than three decades. Staunchly realist, creatively materialist, scholarly rigorous, and politically engaged, Gavin Smith's work illuminates the intersection of theorized histories of productive relations, class conflict, and forms of regional and political identity. Retired in name only, Smith continues to be a forceful and creative presence.

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GAVIN SMITH 2010



A LITTLE WHILE BEFORE HE DIED of cancer in 1999, I wrote a letter to Eric Wolf, telling him my story of the “Three Erics I Have Known”. One of these, my uncle Eric, born in Vienna the youngest child of Melanie Klein, had married my father’s sister and found himself the idiosyncratic outsider in a rural English family. As a result, he earned the undying allegiance of a nephew who likewise felt himself to be in some way on the margins. My uncle never spoke of himself, except when pushed to answer questions about childhood and his famous mother. But I gradually came to learn that he had been in a small group who set up a British *maquis* organized in the event of a German invasion. Parachuted into mainland Europe as a spy on a number of occasions, he had been sent as a scout ahead of the 11th Armoured Division, and was among those who first encountered the horrors of the Nazi concentration camp in Lower Saxony at Belsen in April 1945.

The Eric to whom I was writing was my second Eric. Wolf had saved the first manuscript I had ever written from a premature death. Accepted for publication, it was about to be shelved because the series that it had been scheduled to appear within went defunct. Wolf guided my study into another publication venue. Along the way this second Eric proved to be a person who quietly, thoughtfully, and with gentle humour helped me learn the connection between intellectual labour and politics.

And the third was of course E.J. Hobsbawm, whose 1959 and 2011 publications I would like to use to “bookend” the following reflections.<sup>1</sup>

1. E.J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Manchester 1959); Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World: Marx and*

*Primitive Rebels* was one of the first books I read as I thought about doing a graduate degree. It helped me find my way through the jungle of early graduate school toward a specific issue I wanted to study: what in those days was called "peasant rebellion." My interest in this subject had been provoked by a facetious remark from someone I no longer remember, the gist of the comment being that the meek would only inherit the earth if they were prepared to fight like hell to get it. This drew me to *Primitive Rebels*. In considering whether to go to graduate school, I initially expressed uncertainty about whether to be a historian or an anthropologist. My supervisor asked me to write an essay on the relation between the two disciplines. I began by reading Evans Pritchard's "Anthropology and History." There he tells us that there is nothing wrong with anthropologists doing history; the problem is that they do it badly. And Evans Pritchard had a clear idea of what constituted poor history: "The precursors and founders of our science had attempted... to formulate laws of historical development by which all human societies pass through a determined succession of stages..."<sup>2</sup> When I turned to a work by a famous historian I was surprised to find that it was organized in precisely the way that had upset Evans Pritchard so much, beginning with the most archaic kinds of rebellion and arriving at the end with something close to useful rebellion (but still not quite there).

Late to graduate school, which I entered at age 30, I wanted to be quick out of the starting gate. Less like a greyhound than a terrier, I set to work to find a bone to chew on. It was not quite the one Evans Pritchard would have chosen. I thought I detected in Hobsbawm's account of peasant primitive rebels a kind of patronizing of the landed poor that was, if not politically incorrect (the expression was not used at the time), at least anthropologically so. So I set to work on an essay in which I argued that peasants were quite capable of organizing amongst themselves to achieve goals that in their eyes were worth fighting for, even if they failed the litmus test of many (though not all) Marxists.

I should have been warned by the twinkle in his eye when my supervisor read my response to Hobsbawm. Perhaps, too, I should have wondered why he hadn't given my essay back to me. Instead, he sent it to Eric Hobsbawm and asked him what he thought of it. It's worth making clear at this point two things. First, I was absolutely on the edge of being "a graduate student." Far from having toughened my debating skills in the hard knocks of British MA and PHD seminars, pushed by the currents of the day I had just left Wall Street and remained uncertain about the academy and still more so about my competence to survive in it. And, second, quite unaware of his reputation as a historian, I had run into the jazz critic, Frances Newton (aka Eric Hobsbawm) in Montreal in the late 1960s and had offered to take him round a few clubs.

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*Marxism* (London 2011).

2. E.E. Evans Pritchard, "Anthropology and History," in *Social Anthropology and Other Essays* (New York 1964), 190.

We ended up at my apartment where we played the LPs he had brought from Cuba. Not being a student then – or not really<sup>3</sup> – and trying to make this extremely shy visitor feel at home, I kept the conversation confined to the little I knew about the music that so captivated Newton/Hobsbawm.

So it's not hard to imagine how nervous I was when summoned to Birkbeck to discuss my essay. I was entirely unprepared for my reception (to this day I don't even know if Hobsbawm recognized me as the same character with whom he had ended up leaving his Cuban records a year or so before). Eric the Third went through the paper meticulously and then insisted that I find a place to study that would allow me to demonstrate at least some of the argument I was trying to make – against him. A few months later he phoned me and told me he had found the place: developments in Peru demanded a serious analysis.<sup>4</sup>

It is striking simply to take some of the markers that configure that moment in 1970 when I was making the decision to leave the financial world and apply for graduate school, and compare them to this moment, in 2011, when others much younger than me are facing some similar kind of decision, or have already made it. The first page of the MA thesis I eventually wrote before taking up Hobsbawm's advice and going to Peru, contains the following statement:

Of the 2000 million people living in the underdeveloped world roughly half have experienced some form of revolution in this century. Kathleen Gough estimates that "in one third of the underdeveloped world socialist revolutions are in the making, while in another third they have already happened."

This *was* the setting – or "our" take on it at least – in which I and a number of others at that time tried to carve out an issue, a problem – a *problématique* as we liked to call it – that would shape our research and subsequent discussions, theses, and publications, in which the issue of peasant revolution loomed large.

In contrast to this MA thesis, the first thing I wrote, the last piece I have published concerns itself with something entirely different. Its subject is not socialist revolution in the making but with people who, because they have "no productive function," are effectively a surplus population.<sup>5</sup> As Fred Jameson puts it: "dizzying paper-money speculation on the one hand, and new forms of 'immiseration' on the other, in structural unemployment and in the

3. Who was not a student in Montreal in that year? Just a few weeks before, the biggest student occupation in Canadian history had taken place at Sir George Williams (Concordia), sparked by accusations of racism against a biology professor. McGill students were marching for *McGill français*. And perhaps as a prod to my own career change, the *Front de libération du Québec* blew up the Montreal Stock Exchange. On these and other developments see Bryan D. Palmer, *Canada's 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era* (Toronto 2009) and Sean Mills, *The Empire Within: Postcolonial Thought and Political Activism in Sixties Montreal* (Montreal & Kingston 2010).

4. E.J. Hobsbawm, "Peru: The Peculiar 'Revolution'," *New York Review of Books*, 16 December 1971.

5. Gavin Smith "Selective hegemony and beyond, populations with 'no productive function': a framework for enquiry," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 18 [Forthcoming].

consignment of vast tracts of the Third World to permanent unproductivity.”<sup>6</sup> In this recent writing, I refer to Partha Chatterjee who, unlike Kathleen Gough, and indeed unlike an older Chatterjee,<sup>7</sup> concludes that today, “although capitalist growth in a postcolonial society such as India is inevitably accompanied by the primitive accumulation of capital, the social changes that are brought about *cannot be understood as a transition*.”<sup>8</sup> So it’s not that we are not going anywhere. Rather, it is that like Stephen Leacock’s mountie, we leap on the horse and ride off in all directions.

Another way of bracketing these years is to note some of the books on my shelves when I first came to the University of Toronto in 1975 and some of those to be boxed up when, 35 years later, I left. Among the former were Wolf’s *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*, E.P. Thompson’s *Making of the English Working Class*, Marc Bloch’s edited *Marxist Analyses and Social Anthropology*, and a small book by Peter Worsley, *Inside China*. If I take a random sample of what occupies similar space on my bookshelf today, I come up with: *The Politics of Survival* by Marc Abeles; two books by Chinese scholars, Yasheng Huang’s *Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics: Entrepreneurship and the State* and Ching Kwan Lee’s *Against the Law: Labour Protests in China’s Rustbelt and Sunbelt*; as well, finally, as three books by anthropologists, *Fool’s Gold – How Unrestrained Greed Corrupted a Dream, Shattered Global Markets and Unleashed a Catastrophe* (Gillian Tett), *Governing the Market* (Robert Wade), and *Fixing Failed States*, authored by Ashraf Ghani, one time Minister of Finance in Afghanistan and now Dean of the University of Kabul. Among the books I have been unable to persuade myself to buy are *Transatlantic Fascism*; *The Cinematic Life of the Gene*; *Cosmopolitics I*; and *What is Post-Humanism?*

There is a fairly clear bracketing here around a 35 year period, perhaps made especially clear if I add one final book: Slavoj Žižek’s *In Defence of Lost Causes*. It is conventional and obvious to remark on the optimism of the earlier period and the alienation of the later one. Let me move past the commonplace to accent just two things: what has changed about the relationship between work as an academic in a university and a broader arena of politics; and what implications we might draw from the setting in which the current young academic finds him- or herself in comparison to that earlier period. My understanding of the political setting that surrounded me as I started my job had a powerful effect on how I thought about anthropology and history and what I thought an anthropologist or historian should be doing. That context has changed, and vastly so, as I leave my career.

6. Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London 2010), 375.

7. Kathleen Gough, “New Proposals for Anthropologists,” *Current Anthropology*, 9 (December 1968), 403–435; Partha Chatterjee, “More on Modes of Power and the Peasantry,” in R. Guha and G.C. Spivak, eds., *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York 1988), 351–390.

8. Partha Chatterjee, “Democracy and Economic Transformation in India,” *Economic and Political Weekly* (19 April 2008), 55.





I WAS NOT DRAWN TO ANTHROPOLOGY for some of the normal reasons: an interest in other people's ways of life; a fascination with far off cultures; or a wish to discover the remnants of primitive communism. And I am sure there are vast arrays of other explanations of why particular individuals "become" anthropologists. Nor, once I chose anthropology, was I drawn to history because I was interested in the past. Anthropology attracted me because it appeared to be the one discipline that took as its starting point the study of ordinary people in their daily lives and from the ground up. (This for me was what distinguished it from sociology, for example). Once signed on to the guild, I was surprised that it was only a few of the professionals who actually saw anthropology in this way. While I have no doubt it ages me, it's worth noting one element of the setting that figured decisively in my formative years as an anthropologist, and that quite clearly links a specific era to my choice of research topic. Ernesto "Che" Guevara had been killed only three years earlier trying to catalyze a peasant revolution in central south America; Amílcar Cabral had three more years to live, leading a peasant rebellion in Portuguese west Africa, before being assassinated by colonialist agents; and General Vo Nguyen Giap's "peasant army" was running rings around the US military in Vietnam. In sharp contrast to today's "planet of slums," the vast majority of poor people in the global south at the end of the 1960s were rural dwellers – in a word, peasants.

And yet where anthropologists *had* been interested in popular uprising it had been of a particular kind. In my view at the time, anthropology was too often a marriage of the fixation on "understanding the native" with what Eric Wolf once called "the frisson effect" of exoticism that led to an interest in just one kind of rebellion: the pathological conduct of *the cargo cult*. The text titles of this period were revealing: *The Trumpet Shall Sound*<sup>9</sup>; *Road Belong Cargo: A Study of the Cargo Movement in the Southern Mandong District, New Guinea*; and *New Heaven, New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activities*, and so on. A term in current use, "cargo cult programming," which attempts to achieve goals using programs with no real purpose, reveals quite well what these works were all about. And it is a reminder of the giants one was trying to slay that Norman Cohn's book on medieval mystics and millenarians suggested that Marx's ideas were deeply chiliastic, while Mao's politics were sometimes termed "cargo cult marxism."<sup>10</sup>

9. Despite its title, Peter Worsley's *The Trumpet Shall Sound* had strong historical-materialist leanings, which is not surprising given his association with E.P. Thompson, John Saville, and the *New Reasoner* in the late 1950s. But confusions were inevitable when, in the second edition of his cargo cult study, he added a new Introduction applying a Weberian reading to his material. See Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound: a Study of Cargo Cults in Melanesia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York 1968), ix–lxix.

10. Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical*



And if anthropologists were a little shy of real, effective revolutionary politics, outside of Latin America (and possibly Europe, where few anthropologists worked anyway), they were not much better on the topic of peasants. Indeed use of the term in an English graduate seminar was usually a sure sign that you were a fellow traveller rather than a true believer.<sup>11</sup> The problem was one to which I will return below: anthropologists went to places and studied the people who lived there. For Europeans, this meant studying their “social organization” – their *society*, in short; for Americans, this meant studying their norms, habits, and beliefs – their *culture*, in short. But as Alfred Kroeber had once famously said, peasants lived in part-societies, part-cultures. They did not have a social organization that could be studied *sui generis* as one might study the logic of a kinship system, and their culture was a kind of hybrid located somewhere between the remote autonomy of a folk culture and the messy ways of urban life.<sup>12</sup>

The exception – in both cases: the issue of rebelliousness and the value of the notion “peasantry” – was Eric Wolf, whose *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* came out just as I entered graduate school. The book’s effect on my chosen discipline proved to have less to do with its content than with what it symbolized. Written in a much more historicist than anthropological genre, Wolf’s study was widely dismissed by his fellow anthropologists on the grounds that it was not ethnographically based. But it was impossible not to see *Peasant Wars* as an attempt by a widely respected figure to grapple with a major issue of the time. If I say now that Wolf’s project at the time was unique and that it took more than the period of my graduate education for it to be used widely, I am sure there will be those who can show me to be wrong. But that was my experience.<sup>13</sup>

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*Anarchists in the Middle Ages* (New York 1957).

11. Note Lloyd Fallers, “Are African Cultivators To Be Called ‘Peasants’?,” *Current Anthropology*, 2 (April 1961), 108, which asked the question, “Are African cultivators to be called peasants?” only to reply: “They strike us as being not quite peasant, but not quite tribal – something in between, a *tertium quid*.” Anthropologists’ reluctance to use the term in reference to the African continent carried with it political implications. It took African rural dwellers out of the kinds of discussion about the political role of the peasantry raised by Hobsbawm two years earlier. Ironically we now find a quite similar kind of denial in the refusal to use the notion of the proletariat in application to both rural dwellers in the South and those to be found in the so-called informal sector, for this too takes such people out of discussions about the implications and political possibilities of proletarian uprisings therein. See, for example, Chatterjee’s discussion of what he calls ‘political society’ in Partha Chatterjee, *Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York 2004).

12. Alfred Kroeber, *Anthropology* (New York 1948), 284.

13. Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York 1969), had been preceded by Wolf, *Peasants* (New York 1966). This earlier study had appeared in an introductory series that included titles such as *Hunters and Tribesmen*. The book is in many ways a curiosity with its tangential use of what were evidently Marxist concepts, but rephrased (and possibly distorted as a result) for an American audience: this introductory text was clearly aimed for large under-

The same could hardly be further from the truth for historians of course. "Peasants" had been the stuff of history for aeons. So had revolutions. In both cases, the use of the terms seemed to expand to an extraordinary range. In any event, the point I wish to make is that it was this that turned my attention to history, not history *per se*. In fact it is undeniably the case that I looked less to *history* than to specific historians. This of course brings me back to Eric Hobsbawm, but it also necessarily introduces in to the discussion Edward Thompson. To explain the latter's significance, I need to take a small diversion.

As my graduate studies proceeded, Hobsbawm and Wolf were joined by others who sought to analyse the role of peasant rebellion in societal change, Barrington Moore among others.<sup>14</sup> Broadly speaking, the question these writers sought to answer was what were the socio-economic conditions that might give rise to sustained collective action on the part of peasants? And which kinds of peasants would participate in such a movement (rich or middle peasants, rent or share-crop peasants, peripheral or central peasants and so on)? These questions interested me, since these were the kinds of people I was hoping to study. But I knew that eventually I would be living among such people – people who had experience of some kind of collective political action. In other words I was looking for the mirror image of the peasants of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*. These were not those peasants held together like a sack of potatoes, and relying for inspiration on a populist outsider. This meant that, while profoundly shaped by what I would now call the objectivist kinds of questions of Hobsbawm and Wolf, I wanted in some way to address the more interior questions of how peasants actually organized collective resistance and what kinds of ideas held them together and drove them forward.

If you think about it these are really the "social organization" question and the culture question combined. For Durheimians what held people together was the former, while for others, many located in the more orthodox American anthropological circles, it was their beliefs, norms, customs and habits, what was often referred to in a disciplinary shorthand as culture. But by the early 1970s, the way anthropologists had been using the notion of culture was taking a serious beating. Finding him or herself trying to ask for a drink in a small village in highland New Guinea, it didn't take long for the anthropologist to discover that people got things done differently there than back home. And it wasn't a very big step to conclude that what made the difference was that the culture in a place of study was different from the one where the researcher had been born and grew to intellectual maturity. Beliefs and norms seemed to build

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graduate classroom use. This reminds us how relatively recent is the acceptable use of Marxist concepts, something many of us have come to take for granted. For the dangers of self-censorship, see Wolf's own reflections, "Remarks on *The People of Puerto Rico*," as well as a comment by William Roseberry, "Historical Materialism and *The People of Puerto Rico*," *Revista/Review Interamericana*, 8 (Spring 1978), 17–36.

14. Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston 1966).

up over time as people in a certain place interacted with one another. But as anthropologists became increasingly interested in people who had long been part of larger economies and states, it became increasingly difficult to argue that the people they studied acquired their knowledge, beliefs, laws and customs pre-eminently in the arena of their locality alone. And if no one culture could be seen to be a stand-alone phenomenon of this kind, where were its edges or its definitive coherence – the stuff that framed it all and held it together?

It came as something of a surprise to anthropologists that, just as these problems with the notion *culture* were arising, the concept was in fact having something of a revival elsewhere. Anthropology by this time had been drifting leftwards almost by definition. It was, after all, meant to be the study of people who did not hold in any significant way the reins of power, and yet everywhere you looked these people were on the move, geographically, socially, and politically. As we understood it, they were at last becoming a force in history. Did this mean that they were abandoning their old cultures in favour of different and more popular or utilitarian ones?

It is not hard to see, when the issue is formulated in this way, why Edward Thompson's 1963 magnum opus, *The Making of the English Working Class*, became so attractive to many anthropologists, especially those separable from the most resilient of American culturalists. But just as so many historians turned for sustenance to "anthropology" and came away with only the meagre pickings of Clifford Geertz's cultural interpretivism, so anthropologists who thought Thompson's endorsement of culture would save them from abandoning this their most sacred concept were confusing one use of a word with another.

It is hard to see how two such opposed views of culture could be brought fruitfully together: the anthropologist's building-block notion of a blueprint for conduct that starts at the mother's breast and ends in the local graveyard, and the always immanent and incomplete reaching for collective subjectivity and hence agency that finds tentative expression through the specificities of history that is Thompson's understanding. And yet this was to be so, and out of it much of the muddle between westcoast and Birmingham versions of "cultural studies" was to flow. For my purposes, it is not hard to see how Thompson's understanding of culture became so crucial as I began to work with people who were actively engaged on a daily basis with acts of resistance against the landlords, the police, and the army.

This, then, is my narrative of how I understood the ways in which my insertion into a particular political setting configured the kind of research I did. As I have tried to show, among other things it allied my anthropology if not with history broadly understood, at least with a particular kind of history and its most notable practitioners. The result was what I now call "historical realist anthropology." It goes without saying that this is an overly smooth account – giving a sense of direction and decision where in fact they were lacking. But I think the teleology involved is not entirely the result of the bias of hindsight;

it also has to do with elements of the way I thought then – the way I imagined that I might contribute to an unfolding historical process.

I want now to leap forward to compare those moments of my past with more recent developments. It is appropriate to do so by using Hobsbawm's most recent work as the other bookend on my shelf.

Indeed *How to Change the World*, which came out as I started to write these reflections, would appear to suggest that my third Eric is still thinking in the old, compromised ways – until, that is, one reads the rest of the title, *Tales of Marx and Marxism*. In fact, just as with the other bookend, *Primitive Rebels*, there is a little more to it than that, since there is an interchange here too. Like the first book, this new text says something about the comradeship of left intellectuals of diverse generations, backgrounds and competence. Just as Hobsbawm had responded to something (unpublished) that I wrote just as I entered graduate school, so more recently he responded to something (unpublished) I wrote in his ninetieth year. (In neither case did I expect him to take the trouble to reply.)

A couple of years ago I read a piece by Hobsbawm in the Saturday *Guardian* Book Review section. Essentially, Hobsbawm suggested that any of the good anglophone poets and writers you would care to break bread with had supported the Republic during the Spanish Civil war of 1936–39. As I read the piece I could just see the *Telegraph* readers sharpening the nibs on their pens to the editor: "What about Eliot, Pound etc etc?...." Years had passed. I often came across pieces here and there by Hobsbawm and felt especially remorseful at not having written to him after his memoirs appeared in 2002.<sup>15</sup> The truth is I doubted he would remember me. But this time I wrote him and included the draft of something I had written on the silences in current-day Spain around Franco's repression. I was at this stage sufficiently age-ist to assume that he wouldn't be handling email so I sent it snail-mail to his old address in Highgate. About a week later I received a two-page email with detailed comments on the draft and reminiscences about our mutual (and longstanding) interest in Peru.<sup>16</sup> He ended by talking of his upcoming ninetieth birthday. And now, nearly four years later, we have the book in which this master historian (excuse the gender bias; I think the title is apt) gently suggests that perhaps the time for taking Marx seriously is once again with us, necessitating that his works be read and even reread, rigorously. Would that it were so.

How unlikely it would be in 1970 to read a gentle reminder of the role of poets in one of the major turning points in European history? More revealing, I think, is my assumption (which turned out to be accurate) that Hobsbawm's unrepentant politics would generate indignant responses, evident in Francis Wheen's hostile review of *How to Change the World* in the *Financial Times*.

15. E.J. Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (London 2002).

16. Gavin Smith, *Livelihood and Resistance: Peasants and the Politics of Land in Peru* (Berkeley 1989).

Wheen can not bring himself to see any merit in Hobsbawm's approach to "the anti-fascist campaigns of the 1930s" and how they brought "new recruits to the communist cause," snorting in derision, "To anyone under 50, this book ... will seem either incomprehensible or unpalatable."<sup>17</sup> And yet Hobsbawm's recent writing conveys that he has sensed an element in the mood of current times: the desire to approach key moments in history through fiction and with it the implication that in some ways fiction might explore the intricacies of the dilemmas of the past released from the rigours and traumas of history.

Just before I wrote to Hobsbawm from my field-site in Spain, for example, a postmodern Spanish novel by Javier Cercas, *Soldados de Salamina*, addressed the Spanish Civil War. It was soon greeted with extraordinary acclaim, praised by the likes of Colm Tóibín, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Susan Sontag. The latter, commenting on the 2003 English translation, described the fictional fusion of the past and its troubled memories as "a quick-witted, tender quest for truth and the possibility of reconciliation in history."<sup>18</sup> Woven through the ironies of this complicated narrative of a detective-like search for what happened in the past is the story of Rafael Sanchez Mazas, founder of the Falange. Mazas escaped from a firing squad in the last days of the civil war, aided by one of the Republican soldiers sent to find him as he hid in the woods. This soldier of Salamis refused to deliver Mazas to his execution, even though he could easily have done so. Later, as minister of culture in Franco's government, Sanchez Mazas made much of the fact that he sought out the family of his rescuer and, despite its Republican background, "discretely" channelled goods and protection to the kin of the man who saved him in 1939. The origin of the story was never quite traced back to Sanchez himself, but he never denied its truth, and evidently enjoyed its circulation; it is repeated in the novel. As for the Republican soldier, the fact is that if he indeed existed, we really know very little about him. In the novel, however, he appears as Miralles and, far from being the counter-figure to Sanchez the fascist, he is described as follows: "*Antes de la Guerra Miralles trabajaba de aprendiz de tornero: ignoraba la política: sus padres, gente de condición muy humilde, nunca hablaba de ella; tampoco sus amigos.*" [Before the war Miralles worked as an apprentice lathe operator; he was ignorant of politics: people of very poor background, his parents never discussed them either; nor did his friends.]<sup>19</sup>

As Oscar Wilde once remarked, "If a novelist is base enough to go to life for his personages, he should at least pretend that they are creations, not boast of

17. Note in particular, Francis Wheen, "How to Change the World," *Financial Times*, 21 January 2011.

18. Dust cover quotation from English edition of *Soldados de Salamina*. Trans Anne McLean: *Soldiers of Salamis*. (New York and London 2003).

19. Javier Cercas, *Soldados de Salamina* [*Soldiers of Salamis*] (Barcelona 2001/ republished 2004), 155. Italics added.

them as copies.”<sup>20</sup> The point here is not so much that the intimacy of the novel makes it possible to work through a maze of complex dilemmas, ones that certainly were running through the minds of many Spaniards in 2001 when the novel appeared, as well as later when it was made into a film supposedly using the children of the original protagonists. Rather, for me what is interesting is that the dilemma is formed around the fact that the poor working man was originally *without politics*, which is also the construction of his parents and his friends. This political nullification exists until a series of events find the Republican soldier duped into first joining the Anarchists and then finding himself in Lister’s Communist army. There he is forced to perform an act of execution against the enemy, about which he is made to appear deeply confused. It is not even that we have here a dialogue between a known fascist and an imaginary unknown Republican. Rather, we have an intelligent, well-educated man who is unambiguously a fascist, and the poignancy of his encounter with his Other derives from the fact that the latter, being poor, ignorant, and [therefore?] without politics, only enters the public arena of political confrontation through the contingency of events, which leave him far from certain about his place in history.

Confronted by the evident difference between this kind of treatment of the past and the kinds of treatments that had attracted me to history years earlier, it would be easy to draw a rather simplistic, and oppositional, conclusion: *then* the responsible person sought out a clear political position and was guided by its principles; *now* the responsible person treads carefully through the minefield of politics, taking care not to be drawn in by its siren-call or dogma. I don’t deny that there is some element of truth in such a comparison, but it leads to a blunt form of questioning: “Well, which is the better position?” – blame the past or blame the present? I have not in fact introduced Cercas’s book because I want to damn it. The truth is that the novel, as well as its success, fascinates me.

For one thing, many of my generation in anthropology who were drawn to social history wanted to explore the ways in which disempowered people contributed to their own solidarity, using not so much similarity and agreement as energetic dialogue among themselves.<sup>21</sup> One thing we got from Thompson – and I think this is almost universally ignored by those who claim to study “new social movements” – was that it is struggle itself that shapes the person. Such struggle-driven shaping is an open-ended always-incomplete business. This is awkward politically. I acknowledge that. But it does suggest that the

20. Oscar Wilde, “The Decay of Lying: An Observation,” in *The Works of Oscar Wilde* (London and Glasgow 1948), 914.

21. Smith, *Livelihood and Resistance*; Jay O’Brien and William Roseberry, eds., *Golden Ages, Dark Ages: Imagining the Past in Anthropology and History* (Berkeley 1991); Gerald Sider, *Between History and Tomorrow: Making and Breaking Everyday Life in Rural Newfoundland* (Peterborough, Ontario 2003).



complexities, hesitations, even some of the fragmentations we find today are at least in part a result of those kinds of enquiries by left scholars and activists, not just the result of the current neo-liberal setting. Another way of putting this is that acknowledgement of complexity in political issues and hesitations before deciding on action need not be a way of critiquing an older kind of left politics, but rather a way of seeing how left politics itself developed through the latter part of the last century.

And secondly, “the setting” that I spoke of at the outset seems to me to be different now: different as a setting and different in the role it plays in directing us to the issues we think worthy of study as a necessary preliminary to political action. What after all is “the setting”? The political atmosphere? How does that get delivered to us. In my own case, I think it had greatly to do with two things: first what today would be considered politics on the edge of the orthodox, that is to say industrial actions and street demonstrations; and second, academic literature that addressed specifically the issues that concerned me, or political writings with a broader sweep and for a more general audience. Politically, I didn’t think there was much I could learn from “culture,” which for me meant plays, films and music (jazz). Of course there is that nasty word again. And it was Raymond Williams who helped me to understand that I had a very Arnold-esque deadpan understanding of culture and how it was produced.<sup>22</sup> Again, this seems to suggest that if today we find the interplay between a wide range of cultural expression to be precisely about actual or incipient politics this has as much to do with developments on the left as it does with the expansion of “the culture industry.”

So the setting has changed, but so too has the role of the social environment in influencing the way we direct our energies to particular issues that seem important to us. The obvious first point is that *the social* in the above expression doesn’t seem so easily identifiable as it once was. Some of the formal organizations that seemed to make it up – unions, universities, companies, state bureaucracies – look more like Moebius strips than institutions, bleeding into one another: companies controlling knowledge production; universities selling commodities in the market place; state bureaucracies off-loading to sub-contractors; and so on. Even if there were elements of your setting that influenced you precisely because you wanted to *oppose* them, you risk getting lost somewhere along the Moebius strip. As the social environment as a specific, identifiable configuration of the economy and society appears to be more elusive, so the physical environment appears to be far more visible, if only in its vulnerability.

This does not mean that we are now free of the formative elements of our history and social environment; it means that it is far less easy to grasp what the influence actually is, where it is coming from, how it positions us vis-a-vis

22. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (London 1958); Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford 1977).



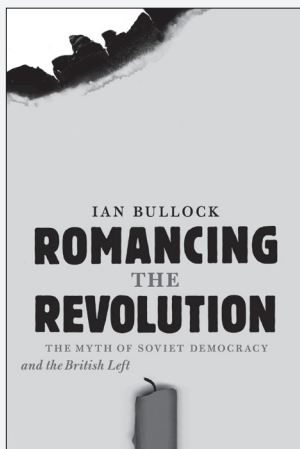
others and so on. At one point after I returned from fieldwork in Peru my partner and I began to make what we probably thought of as an agitprop movie in the Coventry Triumph Motor Cycle factory, which had been occupied by workers. In this setting, I was acutely aware of my class background. Indeed, I was more uncomfortable with my outsider position in this British plant, than I had been in highland Peru. For others it would no doubt be different. But for me right then class trumped all: not race, not gender, not age – class. It's hard to imagine what a similar situation would be today (and of course in a different geographical setting), but I think the complexity of what appear to be the relevant forces that position a person from one moment to another can have the effect of making it seem as though the individual is free-floating: if not precisely able to choose, then at least situationally, even contingently, formed from one moment and setting to another.

In my own discipline this has affected the kind of issues and problems that young anthropologists seek out to immerse themselves in for their research. Perhaps most strikingly it has changed the relationships in the triad, *student-studied-product*. For one thing the so-called knowledge economy wants to ensure that *the final product* has a saleable value. But more crucially the problematic of resolving one's personal positionality preliminary to identifying an issue for study can become a handicap in itself. When combined with a heightened sensitivity toward those who may become the "objects" (sic) of study the result can be a kind of enquiry that is turned in on itself. What *are* the appropriate criteria for selecting out what will become a crucial focus of one's research and eventually possibly the direction of one's career? Can the end result of one's research have a leverage effect in changing current reality? Certainly that was a pressing concern for me forty years ago. I'm not sure I would know how to answer it now and, not knowing, I can't see that it would even be an important criterion in choosing a given path. I don't see this as a bad thing, but I do see it as an infinitely harder challenge for today's generation than my own. What makes it especially difficult now is the collusion of the universities in prostituting scholarship, not just to capitalist firms but also to state directives and so-called "non-government organizations/NGOs," most of which operate without even a public façade of democratic consultation with those whose lives they are ostensibly working to better. This means that the choice for an anthropologist embarking on a graduate research project, tends not to be between an undertaking that would contribute to the struggles of the left versus one that enhances entrepreneurial competitiveness, the ideology of acquisitive individualism, or specific government programs geared to enlarge a ruling order's hegemony. The choice instead is between the latter and something that is preciously scholarly – the academic version of art for art's sake.

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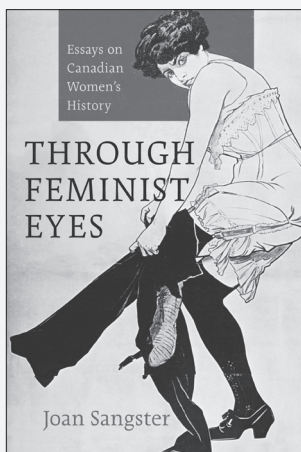


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