

Book Review: How to Change the World: Tales of Marx and Marxism

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James Moran takes a closer look at **Eric Hobsbawm's** work on the relevance of Marxism for the 21st century.

How to Change the World: Tales of Marx and Marxism. Eric Hobsbawm. January 2011. [Little, Brown.](#)

This collection of essays from Eric Hobsbawm's long and industrious career as a Marxist historian is a *tour de force* of serious historical writing. Hobsbawm is perhaps best known for his highly-respected trilogy of books [The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789-1848](#), [The Age of Capital: 1848-1875](#) and [The Age of Empire: 1875-1914](#), but now aged ninety three this new publication might be viewed as his academic swansong.



ERIC HOBSBAWM
HOW TO CHANGE
THE WORLD
TALES OF MARX AND MARXISM



The book's title, *How To Change The World*, is a little misleading, as it suggests a cohesive manifesto of revolutionary ideas. Rather, the book contains sixteen essays concerning the history of Marxism from 1840 to 2011. If there is one single argument underpinning the collection, it is that for the past 130 years Marxist ideas have "been a major theme in the intellectual music of the modern world".

Hobsbawm convinces his reader of this by firstly, in Part I, explaining the historical roots of Marx and Engels' ideas, and then showing how they were sharply focussed on the problems of capitalism as it was then. Part II shifts the reader's focus to Marxism in the 20th century, showing how modern Marxist thinkers such as Gramsci (the subject of a particularly lucid and engaging chapter) re-interpreted and adapted classical Marxism.

Hobsbawm is at his best when he translates his complex and nuanced understanding of a vast array of research into a clear and accessible account, though he does occasionally fail to give the reader a broader context for his subject matter. The first few chapters, focussing on how Marx's writing was heavily influenced by a mixture of French socialism, German philosophy and British political economics, are perhaps slightly dry and detailed for a reader new to Marx's ideas. One couldn't help but feel that an introduction, giving a broader context to Marx and his ideas, would have given these narrowly focussed essays much more impact. However, to a reader already aware of the key ideas at play, these essays are a detailed and interesting account of Marx's historical context.

Hobsbawm largely eschews giving an account of the strictly philosophical influences on Marx – particularly noticeable by its absence is an essay dealing specifically with the German Idealist philosopher Hegel, whose historical dialecticism was a major influence on Marx's conception of a deterministic historical class struggle. Perhaps not surprisingly for a Marxist historian, Hobsbawm instead prefers to deal with the historical context in which Marx was writing. But the author's powerful and authoritative sense of history – this is a man who was born in the year of Russian Revolution – makes these accounts feel engaging.

Especially toward the last essays in this book, Hobsbawm stresses the relevance of Marxism today. He argues that economic and political liberalism is unable to provide solutions to 21st century problems. Citing the crash of 2008, Hobsbawm identifies the "pathological" belief that "government is not the solution, but the problem", which will only lead to disaster unless it is abandoned and an alternative found. This alternative, and his belief that Marxist ideas provide a rich and complex starting point for such an alternative, is made all the more credible due to his consistently historical approach.

This is a serious, detailed and lucidly written collection, which gives the reader a rigorous account of Marxism. Though not, perhaps, a text for someone approaching Marxism for the first time, Hobsbawm's experience certainly impresses one already familiar with Marxism's central ideas.

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