

Eric Hobsbawm, sociologist of peasant millenarianism

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AS A HISTORIAN interested in the social sciences, Eric Hobsbawm provided a very significant approach to the sociology of religions, thanks to his work on peasant millenarianism. It is one of the dimensions of his pioneering research into the so-called «primitive» forms of rebellion. A Jew of German culture born in Egypt in 1917, educated in Vienna and Berlin and later in Oxford and Cambridge, Hobsbawm is one of the greatest English historians of the twentieth century. A leftist intellectual, he represents, first and foremost, a man of the Enlightenment: Does he not define socialism as the last heir of the eighteenth century rationalism? So it is not surprising that the distinction between «modern» and «primitive» or «archaic» has an important place in his work.¹

However, examining some of his writings, and in particular his two books from the period 1959-1969 dedicated to the so-called archaic forms of revolt, it is evident that his approach differs markedly from the “progressive” orthodoxy in its interest, affinity and even fascination - the terms are his own - for the primitive movements of peasant anti-modern (anti-capitalist) resistance and protest. This is particularly the case of *Primitive Rebels* (1959) and *Bandits* (1972).² These are also writings that come very close to certain problems of the social sciences. In the introduction to the first book, Jacques Le Goff commented: thanks to his “sense of structural similarities, his historical sensitivity leads to sociological and anthropological horizons.” In fact, this book is the result of a series of lectures delivered by the author at the University of Manchester, followed by discussions with his Marxist sociologist and anthropologist friends Peter Worsley - an expert in the primitive messianisms in Melanesia (the “Cargo Cult”) - and the Africanist Max Gluckman (Hobsbawm, 1966, p.10, 13).

This attitude — at one and the same time methodological, ethical and political — implies a distancing in relation to a certain type of historiography that tends — because of what he criticizes as a rationalist and ‘modernist bias — to ignore these movements, seeing them as strange vestiges or marginal phenomena. But Hobsbawm insisted these ‘primitive, and in particular rural populations were still today — that is, in the 1950s — the overwhelming majority of the nation in most of the countries in the world. Furthermore, and this is the decisive argument for this historian, ‘their acquisition of political consciousness has made our century the most revolutionary in history’ (Hobsbawm, 1966,

p.15-6, 1959, p.2-3). In other words, far from being marginal, this type of movement is the source or root of the great revolutionary upheavals of the twentieth century, in which peasants and the mass of the rural poor have played a crucial part: the Mexican Revolution of 1911-19, the 1917 Russian Revolution, the 1936 Spanish Revolution, the Chinese and Cuban Revolutions. This idea is merely suggested by Hobsbawm, who does not deal directly with any of these events, but it forms a sort of backdrop to his research on the 'primitives'.³

Hobsbawm says that, in order to understand these revolts, you have to start from the realization that modernization, the intrusion of capitalism into traditional peasant societies and the advent of economic liberalism and modern social relationships, is truly catastrophic for them, a genuine social cataclysm that leaves them completely out of joint. Whether the arrival of the modern capitalist world is a gradual process, through the working of economic forces the peasants do not understand, or a sudden one, brought about by conquest or a change of regime, they perceive it as an aggressive act that destroys their way of life. Mass peasant revolts against this new order, which is experienced as unbearably unjust, are often inspired by nostalgia for the traditional world, the 'good old days' — that belong more or less to the realm of myth — and take on the appearance of a kind of "political Luddism" (Hobsbawm, 1966, p.16, 83, 137; 1959, p.3, 67, 119).

This applies, for example, to the archaic form of revolt that is social banditry, which Hobsbawm curiously defines as "reformist" because it aims to "correct errors" without touching the existing social structures. The bandit of honor can also, in some cases, become a "traditionalist revolutionary", for the purpose of reestablishing the "good old" church or the "good old" king. Finally, he can become millenarian, dreaming of a "totally *new* world that will know no evil", a world of equality, fraternity and liberty, "waiting for the Apocalypse." This type of millenarian dream is inherent in the peasant society. Indeed, social banditry and millenarianism - the most primitive forms of reform and revolution - "go together historically." Incidentally, the bandits of honor often recognize, either "consciously or unconsciously, the superiority of the millenarian or revolutionary dream in relation to their own activities." This is the reason why Lampião, the legendary bandit of the Brazilian Northeast in the 1920s was submissive, with his band of outlaws, to the messianic leader from the town of Juazeiro, Father Cicero (Hobsbawm, 1972, p.19-21). The example is not very appropriate, to the extent that *Father* Cicero was far from being a revolutionary and was a poor millenarian; most interesting was the case of Canudos, a village formed by outlaws and poor peasants, followers of the millenarian prophet Antonio Conselheiro (Antonio the Counselor), who at the end of the nineteenth century (1869-1897) fought like lions against the army of the Brazilian Republic, an invention of the devil. It is true that the doctrines of Conselheiro are more closely related to what Hobsbawm calls "revolutionary traditionalism", but it

was still a socially subversive movement of poor peasants and “social bandits”.⁴

Of all the forms of ‘primitive’ revolt, the millenarian movements seem to the historian the most likely to become revolutionary. One could say there is a sort of ‘elective affinity’ — this is our terminology and not Eric Hobsbawm’s (Löwy, 1988) -, a structural analogy between millenarianism and revolution:

The essence of millenarianism, the hope of a complete and radical change in the world which will be reflected in the millennium, a world shorn of all its present deficiencies, is not confined to primitivism. It is present, almost by definition, in all revolutionary movements of whatever kind, and “millenarian” elements may therefore be discovered in any of them, insofar as they have ideals.

And he adds that archaic millenarian movements in Europe have three characteristic features: 1- a revolutionary aspect, for instance deep and total rejection of the existing evil world and a passionate aspiration to another, better one; 2 - a “chiliastic” type of ideology, usually of messianic Judeo-Christian origin; 3 - a fundamental vagueness as to the means of bringing about the new society (Hobsbawm, 1966, p.73).⁵ Hobsbawm’s research falls on three types of peasant millenarianisms: those that seem to be, first of all, religious, those who are both religious and sociopolitical, and those that seem purely secular. Despite these differences, they nevertheless belong to a kind of common socio-cultural matrix.⁶

All the examples studied concern southern Europe - Italy and Spain. Interestingly, Eric Hobsbawm, contrary to his colleagues and friends Christopher Hill and E. P. Thompson, was not interested in the millenarian movements in England. Admittedly, he wrote with George Rudé a brilliant study about a ‘primitive’ peasant movement, in England, of revolt against capitalist modernization, in the form of ‘Luddism’ (‘destruction of machines’). However, this 1830 movement led by the mythical “Captain Swing” had no millenarian features; anyway the authors make no reference to that in their study. In another study devoted to the issue of the role of Methodism in the revolutionary upheaval in England in the late eighteenth century, Hobsbawm concludes that the so-called ‘primitive’ Methodists and some other dissident movements may have favored the radical upheaval in some popular milieu (miners, weavers) without, however, having played a decisive role. We are far from the Spanish or Italian peasant millenarianism (Hobsbawm & Rude, 1969).

Revolutionary millenarianism dates back, according to Hobsbawm, to Joachim of Flora (1145-1202), the inventor of the doctrine of the three Ages of the World: the Age of the Father (Law), the Age of the Son (Faith), and the future age, that of the Holy Ghost. This millenarian prophet – considered by Norman Cohn the inventor of the most powerful prophetic dialectic that Europe had ever seen before the emergence of Marxism – distinguished between

the reign of *justice or law*, which is essentially the equitable regulation of social relations in an imperfect society, and the reign of *freedom*, which is the perfect society: Reform and Revolution ... (Hobsbawm, 1966, p.25). As we shall see, some of the millenarian movements of the nineteenth century he will study are the distant heirs of Joachimism.

Reading the works of Eric Hobsbawm, it becomes evident that millenarianism exerts a real fascination upon him - which does not preclude, of course, the critical distance. It is, he writes, a phenomenon that “will always be intensely exciting for all those whom the luck of men does not leave indifferent” (ibid, p.124). Thanks to the problematic of millenarianism, Eric Hobsbawm’s historiography incorporates all the richness of socio-cultural subjectivity — the depth of beliefs, feelings and emotions — into his analysis of historical events, which, from this viewpoint, are no longer perceived simply as products of the ‘objective’ interplay of economic or political forces. This openness to the subjective dimension means that analysis in terms of social classes does not preclude the irreducible part played by individuals — both famous and anonymous — whom the historian often allows to speak.

Although he makes a careful distinction between primitive millenarianisms and modern revolutionisms, Hobsbawm nevertheless emphasizes their elective relationship (or affinity): “Even the least millenarian modern revolutionaries have in them a streak of ‘impossibilism’ which makes them cousins to the Taborites and Anabaptists, a kinship which they have never denied” (ibid, p.80).⁷ This formula probably refers to the writings of Ernst Bloch, which Hobsbawm was well acquainted with, especially *Thomas Munzer, théologien de la révolution* (1921), in which Anabaptism is presented as the ancestor of the modern revolutionary movements.

This does not mean that “all” revolutionary movements are millenarian in the strict sense or that they are connected to a primitive type of chiliasm. And vice versa: not every millenarian movement is necessarily revolutionary.⁸ However, the distinction is easy. Let us take the case studied by Hobsbawm in *Les primitifs de la révolte*, the messianic uprising around the Joachimite prophet Davide Lazzaretti in Tuscany in the 1870s. According to several Italian researchers, e.g. M. Barzelotti, that movement would have been purely religious, with no political implications. Eric Hobsbawm (1966, p.81) strongly challenges this assumption and proposes another approach, whose methodological significance regarding the sociology of religions goes far beyond the case under discussion:

The kinds of community which produced millenarian heresies are not the ones in which clear distinctions between religious and secular things can be drawn. To argue about whether such a sect is religious or social is meaningless, for it will automatically and always be both in some manner.

This hypothesis – the *confusion*, the mixture, the hybridism, the osmosis

between the religious and the socio-political - is one of the most interesting contributions of his research on peasant millenarianism.

In the example of Tuscany, moreover, this mixture is hardly disputable: the prophet and his disciples, the Lazzarettists were passionately interested in politics: the slogan of their flag “the Republic is the Kingdom of God,” was quite subversive, Italy being a monarchy at that time. As they marched in procession they sang:

We go by Faith
To save our fatherland,
Long live the Republic,
God and Liberty.

Davide Lazzaretti preached in favor of the “Republic of Christ,” which, in the eyes of the authorities of the kingdom was totally unacceptable (ibid, p.81-2).

Eric Hobsbawm begins with a sociological, economic and historical analysis of the Lazzarettist social base: it is the poor, especially the peasants, in the region of Mount Amiata, one of the most backward, both economically and culturally (massive illiteracy) in Tuscany. With the unification of the country, the laws of Piedmont were imposed as the standard laws of Italy, in the form of a ruthless liberal economic code that had disastrous social consequences in regions like that. For example, the forest law which abrogated customary rights of common pastures and firewood collecting for heating. In addition, new taxes enacted by Parliament led to increases in food prices, causing hunger riots and uprisings throughout Italy: in 1867, 257 people were killed, 1,099 wounded and 3,788 arrested in the country (ibid, p.84).

Born in 1834, Davide Lazzaretti was a waggoner who converted in 1868 and began to introduce himself as a new prophet, a new shepherd of the Sinai, a reformer, a legislator ready to freed the people who moaned, ‘submitted by despotism to slavery’. His task was to reconcile the Church with the people and form a militia of young Italians, ‘the militia of the Holy Ghost’ to accomplish the moral and civil regeneration. At the beginning he enjoyed some protection from the Catholic Church, which was hostile to the monarchy, an ungodly government, and to the secular and liberal ideas. However, his preaching, inspired by popular heresies and Joachimite doctrines – the three successive kingdoms, that of Grace, that of Justice and that of the Holy Ghost, the imminent third and final age of the world - will soon be denounced by the Church and, in 1878, when he presents himself as the Messiah, he was excommunicated by the Vatican. This did not reduce but rather increased his influence on the peasants of Mount Amiata, who abandoned the churches to join the new prophet. On August 18, he descended from the mountain on the town of Arcidosso, followed by 3,000 of his supporters, singing hymns and carrying the flag of the Republic of God, some wearing the uniform of ‘the Militia of the Holy Ghost’, but all

of them unarmed. To the guards who ordered them to turn back, Davide Lazzaretti answered: "If you want peace, I bring you peace ... if you want blood, here I am." The guards fired randomly and Lazzaretti was among the killed; his apostles were tried and convicted. Throughout the twentieth century, even those who still considered themselves his disciples sided with the communist movement, which respected him as its precursor. When in 1948 an attempt was made to assassinate Palmiro Togliatti, as spontaneous popular uprising occurred in Arcidosso and, according to Hobsbawm's comment it was "a second, revised and corrected edition of the descent from the Mount Amiata" (*ibid* , p.82- 6).⁹

Lazzarettism reveals, in its own way, that the affinity between millenarianism and rebellion is a basic fact in the history of peasant revolts against capitalist modernization. It seems to me that this is one of the most interesting research hypotheses outlined by Hobsbawm in his work of that period. He illustrated his idea in two utterly enthralling case studies: one that is at the same and one time religious and social - the Sicilian peasant leagues - and another that is in principle antireligious - rural anarchism in Andalusia: both starting at the end of the nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth.

The Andalusian agrarian anarchism developed over periodic revolts during the years 1870-1917, with a final event in 1931, when the Republic was proclaimed in Spain. Interestingly, Hobsbawm was not interested in the rural anarchism in Catalonia and Aragon, which experienced a spectacular development in the years 1936-1937, at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. Probably because the advent of modern anarcho-syndicalism in Spain over the twentieth century represent, in his opinion, due to its the methodical organization, discipline, strategy and tactics, a step beyond the 'pure spontaneity of the messianism' that characterized the 'primitive' uprisings of the first decades of the libertarian movement (*ibid*, p.107). The distinction is legitimate but, in our view, the agrarian collectivizations of the 'short summer of Anarchy' of 1936-1937, prompted by Durriti and his friends, had much in common with the "millenarian" Andalusian rebellions of the past.

According to Hobsbawm, these rebellions have undoubtedly economic causes, but cannot be described as 'hunger riots': "When men are really hungry, they get too busy looking for food to be able to do anything else." The best explanation for this endemic social revolutionary spirit is 'the introduction of legal and social capitalist relationships into the Southern rural environment during the first half of the nineteenth century'. The imposition of the free land market and the concentration of landholdings changed the distribution of the operating forces: around 1931, 80 percent of the rural population had no land at all, while 6,000 large landowners held 56 percent of the taxable income. To this one should add the evolution of Spanish Catholicism since the late eighteenth century, increasingly associated with the ruling classes and distant from the peasants (*ibid*, p.96-7). Therefore, in the last quarter of the century the advertisers

of Anarchism reached a favorable place, disseminating the ideas of Bakunin and Kropotkin. They were successful because “no political movement of modern times had reflected in such a sensitive, precise way, the spontaneous aspirations of the primitive peasants.” To study the Andalusian libertarian communism, the English historian relied on the work of a jurist from the beginning of the century, F. Diaz del Moral, author of a voluminous *Histoire des agitations agraires dans la Province de Cordoue* (Madrid, 1929) and on personal research on the village of Casas Viejas (Cadiz), one of the epicenters of the peasant revolt.

There was nothing religious about the movement in the usual sense of the term; on the contrary, it violently opposed to the Catholic Church, not hesitating in setting fire to churches and convents. According to Hobsbawm, this attitude “probably reflects the bitterness of the peasants in view of the ‘betrayal of the poor’ by the Church.” Fiercely anti-religious, it is nevertheless “the most impressive example of a modern mass millenarian or quasi-millenarian movement. “With its simple revolutionism, its total and absolute rejection of this perverse and oppressive world, its absolute faith in the Great Change, the advent of a world of Justice and Liberty, this libertarian communist movement — which in an uncanny way chimed with the feelings and spontaneous aspirations of the Andalusian peasantry and their refusal of the new capitalist order — was ‘utopian, millenarian, apocalyptic’. (ibid, p.99-106).

Both Diaz del Moral, a contemporary observer, and Hobsbawm himself used a ‘religious’ terminology to describe this phenomenon: the movement was inspired by ‘Bakuninist apostles’ who brought the ‘good word’, the writings of Kropotkin and Malatesta discussed with ‘fervor and severity’ by the Andalusian peasants. The ‘new gospel’ spread spontaneously from one village to another: the ‘converted’ surrendered to an ‘ardent proselytism’ and brought to their ideal friends and coworkers. These new ‘apostles’ often benefited from the support of the entire village, especially “when the frugality of their existence was a testimonial to their faith.” Around 1900, the news of the international debate on the new general strike reached Andalusia, and the peasants organized in many villages ‘messianic strikes’, i.e., spontaneous and massive work stoppages, with no claims or any attempt to negotiate: they went on strike ‘for more important things than wages’; the true goal was the social revolution, and if people were fighting it was “to accelerate the coming of the millennium.” The latter was seen as a change “so complete and apocalyptic” that nothing would remain of the old world of oppression and inequality: it would be the beginning of a just world “in which those who had been the last would be the first and the goods of this earth would be shared among all.” In their view, “the strength of the millennium was such that if it actually came, not even the aristocracy would be able to resist” (ibid, p.103-6).

What does this ‘religious’ vocabulary mean? Is it a simple metaphor, reasoning by analogy? Is it about analyzing the Andalusian peasant An-

archism as secularized millenarianism? Or suggest a millenarian matrix common to religious and secular phenomena? And what should be understood as 'millenarianism'? Hobsbawm does not answer these questions, but in a passage in the book he tries to determine the millenarian specificity of the libertarian movement: the anarchist agrarian uprisings "were clearly revolutionary, their sole purpose was the establishment of fundamental subversion. They were millenarian in the sense that we understand it, to the extent that they themselves should not make the revolution;" this "would eventually occur, as they had expressed such hope" (ibid, p.105). The argument does not seem convincing, because if those peasants revolted and sometimes established an (ephemeral) libertarian communism in their villages - as shown by Hobsbawm in the case of the revolt of Casas Viejas in 1933 - it is actually because they should do it 'themselves', without waiting for it 'to ultimately occur.' Hobsbawm seems to recognize it when he writes a few lines down: "What appeared to be a millenarian demonstration could be just the least hopeless among available revolutionary techniques" (ibid, p.105-6). So, what would relate to millenarianism - in a secular form - would be mainly the structure of the revolutionary vision, the total and immediate rupture with the past and the start of the reign of full justice. However, one can wonder whether the Andalusian libertarian communists would not represent, in a particularly extreme way, what Hobsbawm defines as the unavoidable millenarian dimension of any revolutionary movement ...

The other millenarian revolutionary movement studied by Hobsbawm is the Sicilian peasant leagues. It is an example contrary to that of the Lazzarettist movement. Apparently secular, there was nothing millenarian about its claims, such as the abolition of taxes and import duties on goods, a reform of agricultural leases, etc. However, it also expressed a revolutionary aspiration which, within these Sicilian peasants, could not but take a millenarian and 'religious' form: therefore it is not surprising that the great and exciting revolutionary hopes deposited by peasants in the *Fasci* [peasant leagues] were expressed in traditional millenarian terms. As happened in Andalusia, which is strikingly similar to Sicily, the peasants revolted at the end of the nineteenth century against the introduction of capitalist relationships into the rural environment — with consequences that were aggravated by the world depression in agriculture of the 1880s. The movement arose with the foundation and growth of the peasant leagues, usually under socialist leadership, followed by riots and strikes on a scale that scared the Italian government, causing it to make use of troops to stamp out the threat in 1894. Why didn't the propagandists of Anarchism - among them brilliant intellectuals like Enrico Malatesta - who tried to cover the south of Italy did not have the same success as Spain - despite the obvious similarities between the peasants two regions - and were overtaken by socialist (Marxists) agitators? The attempts by the English historian to explain this difference were unsuccessful, and he notes that only a thorough knowledge of the history and

sociology of Spain and the Kingdom of the two Sicilies would enable understanding it (*ibid*, p.114-6).¹⁰

This movement was 'primitive' and millenarian to the extent that the socialism preached by the leagues was seen by the Sicilian peasants as a new religion, the true religion of Christ — betrayed by the priests, who were on the side of the rich — that foretold the advent of a new world, without poverty, hunger and cold, in accordance with God's will. Crosses and images of saints were carried when they demonstrated and the movement, which included many women, spread like an epidemic during 1891-94: the peasant masses were urged on by the messianic belief that the start of a new reign of justice was imminent. In an atmosphere of exaltation, groups of converts were in charge of spreading the happy news, "because in a millenarian period, as we saw in Andalusia, each person becomes a propagandist." At the same time, as innumerable accounts reveal "there is no doubt at all that revolution was what the peasants hoped for, a new and just, equal and communist society". This is the case, for instance, of the impressive statement from a peasant woman from the village of Piana dei Greci (published among the documents in the book's appendix): "We should all be equal [...] It should be sufficient to put everything together and share equally what is produced in a society in which" a "fraternal spirit prevails" (*ibid*, p.114-6, 121, 123). The question is whether millenarianism is a mental structure, a permanent cultural substrate, or just a momentary outburst, a 'period' of short duration: Eric Hobsbawm seems to suggest both at the same time, i.e., a millenarian 'mindset' that expresses itself radically at times of crisis and upheaval.

Indeed, he notes, the peasant leagues were not millenarian in the Lazzarrettist or Andalusian anarchist sense. However, in the Sicilian peasant context - these "primitive people turned into fanatics by a new faith," according to the liberal A. Rossi - the socialist teaching, for the simple fact that it is revolutionary, "should have strongly millenarian aspects." Contrary to what happened in Andalusia, the new religion would not cause an open rupture with the former, Christian religion: for the peasant of Piana dei Greci, Jesus was a true socialist and wanted precisely what the peasant leagues demanded. In other words: the movement was not religious, but "the aspirations of the peasants were automatically expressed in a religious terminology" (*ibid*, p.117-8).

Hobsbawm finds the movement of the Sicilian peasant leagues a prime example, in that it is a 'primitive' agrarian movement that becomes 'modern' by aligning itself with socialism and communism. Despite the 1894 defeat, permanent peasant movements were set up in certain areas of Sicily, thanks to the socialists' modern organizational methods, and were inherited by the communist movement after the Great War. The story of the village of Piana dei Greci is illustrative of this continuity: epicenter of the late nineteenth-century revolts, it was a communist stronghold still in the 1950s: "their original millenarian enthusiasm has been transmuted into something more durable: permanent and

organized allegiance to a modern social-revolutionary movement.” As far as Hobsbawm is concerned, this development is not simply a substitution of the ‘modern’ for the ‘archaic’, but a kind of ‘dialectical integration’ — in the sense of the Hegelian-Marxist *Aufhebung* — of the former into the latter: Piana’s experience “shows that millenarianism need not be a temporary phenomenon but can, under favorable conditions, be the foundation of a permanent and exceedingly tough and resistant form of movement”. (ibidem, p.121-2)

In other words, millenarianism should not be seen only as ‘a touching survival from an archaic past’, but as a cultural force that is still active, in another guise, in modern social and political movements. The conclusion he offers at the end of his chapter devoted to the Sicilian leagues has a clear historical, social and political resonance that is wider and more universal:

When harnessed to a modern movement, millenarianism can not only become politically effective, but it may do so without the loss of that zeal, that burning confidence in a new world, and that generosity of emotion which characterizes it even in its most primitive and perverse forms. (ibidem, p.123-4)

This remark may be taken almost as the ‘moral of the story’ for the whole of his work on millenarianism and primitive revolts.

The works of Eric Hobsbawm raise questions of close interest to the sociology of religions: what are the social (and economic) conditions that favor the development of millenarian movements? What are their relations with the ‘archaic’ - pre-capitalist – culture of peasant layers? What might be the relationship between the religious, social and political realms in peasant millenarianism? Is there a matrix common to religious and socio-political movements of the millenarian type? He not always provides answers to these questions, but his approach is extremely fruitful. It would be interesting to compare his research with that of other social scientists attracted by messianisms and millenarianisms - Karl Mannheim, Ernst Bloch and Henri Desroches.

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It seems to us that Eric Hobsbawm, in this case, has opened a fascinating avenue for research that is worth pursuing, not only by historians but also by political sociologists or anthropologists studying contemporary (late twentieth-century) phenomena. We will quote just two examples from our own research field, as sociologists interested in Latin America: the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in Chiapas (Mexico) and the Landless Peasant Movement (MST) in Brazil. Both are peasant movements protesting against (and resisting) capitalist modernization, both contain millenarian elements that are similar to the phenomena studied by Hobsbawm, and both are fundamentally modern

movements in their agenda, their demands, their activities and their organizational forms. Eric Hobsbawm himself wrote several very interesting articles about the peasant movements in Latin America, especially in Peru and Colombia, during the second half of the twentieth century, but he no longer analyzes them from the standpoint of millenarianism.

The EZLN arose in the Chiapas mountains out of the fusion of a Guevarism (which itself is not without a millenarian dimension) of a handful of urban militants with the “archaic” revolt of native Maya communities and the Christian messianism of the base communities (founded in the 1970s by the Bishop of Chiapas, Mgr Samuel Ruiz), under the supreme banner of the millenarian legend of Emiliano Zapata. The result of this explosive political, cultural, social and religious cocktail has been some of the most original peasant rebellions of the 1990s.

It is true that the January 1994 Zapatista uprising was directed against the age-old oppression of the indigenous Mayas by the authorities and landowners, but it was immediately motivated by the neo-liberal modernization measures introduced by the federal government: privatization of the rural communities (*ejidos*) created by the Mexican Revolution, and the free-trade agreement with the United States (ALENA), which threatened with collapse the traditional growing of maize by indigenous communities — the basis of their cultural identity over thousands of years — by opening Mexico up to GM maize from North American agro-businesses.

The Zapatista movement is also distinguished by a libertarian component, which can be seen both in the self-management of the villages and in its refusal to play the political game and even to accept the possibility of “taking over power”. That is why anarchist or anarcho-syndicalist movements, which are experiencing a certain revival, particularly in southern Europe, have turned solidarity with the Chiapas rebels into one of their main areas of intervention.

As for the Brazilian MST, which has its socio-cultural roots in the Church’s Land Pastoral, church communities and liberation theology, it is also marked by an amazing mixture of popular religiosity, ‘archaic’ peasant revolt and modern organization, in a radical struggle for agrarian reform and, eventually, for a ‘classless society’. This movement, which has a high emotional and ‘mystical’ component — ‘mystical’ is the term the militants themselves use to describe the participants’ state of mind — or even ‘millenarian’ (in the broad sense) — the similarity to the 1890s Sicilian leagues is striking — it brings together hundreds of thousands of peasants, tenant farmers and agricultural laborers and has now become the biggest social movement in Brazil and the main force protesting against the neo-liberal modernization policy of successive Brazilian governments.

To judge by these examples, revolutionary millenarianism — the most radical form of peasant resistance against capitalist modernization — as Eric Hobsbawm studied it, is not necessarily a phenomenon of the past.

Notes

- 1 We systematically put quotation marks round the words ‘primitive’ or “archaic” — which Hobsbawm does not always do — to indicate a certain critical distance with regard to terms that are useful but nevertheless quite closely linked with an evolutionist or “modernist” view of history.
- 2 We shall not be dealing here with Hobsbawm’s work on the peasantry published during the 1970s and included in the admirable collection *Uncommon People* (1998, New York, The New Press). Its problematic is different and it does not refer (or refers very little) to the two aspects that concern me in this article: resistance to capitalism and revolutionary millenarianism.
- 3 Sadly this notion is not taken up by Hobsbawm in his history of the twentieth century: he demonstrates very pertinently how the process of modernization led to the spectacular decline of the peasantry after the Second World War, but he does not raise the question of peasant resistance to this decline, nor does he study more systematically the part played by ‘primitive’ peasant groups in the century’s great revolutionary movements (see Hobsbawm, 1994, p.289-94).
- 4 Hobsbawm mentions Canudos in a footnote to the chapter on Lazzarettist millenarianism of *Les primitifs de la révolte* (Hobsbawm, 1966, p.89): “The Rebel Zion of Canudos truly fought to the last man.” The event was the subject of one of the greatest books of Brazilian literature, *Os sertões*, by Euclides da Cunha.
- 5 According to Hobsbawm, other religions, to the extent that they see the world as stable or cyclical, are less conducive to the rise of millenarianism. The hypothesis is debatable ...
- 6 This typology is proposed by us; it is not formulated as such in Hobsbawm.
- 7 Where does Hobsbawm’s interest in millenarianism, in his work of the late 1950s, spring from? When he talked with us on 20 March 1982, he suggested three possible explanations: “Perhaps it’s because I belonged to a revolutionary movement. Then it was the moment of the 20th congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and we felt we needed to sum up, ask some basic questions. And finally I was influenced by anthropologists who had worked on that topic, in particular Max Glucksmann and his followers, such as Peter Worsley, who was a fellow-comrade in the party at the time. Curiously, Eric Hobsbawm does not seem to be interested in the Jewish, prophetic and messianic, veteran-testamentary sources of millenarianism. Contrary to other Jewish intellectuals of German culture - Ernst Bloch or Walter Benjamin – he does not give the impression of being motivated by his Jewish origin as regards the interest in millenarian movement.
- 8 Hobsbawm dissociates himself here from Norman Cohn’s work — *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957) — which he accuses, not without reason, of blurring the difference between the two.
- 9 The author of these lines (Michel Löwy) participated, in 2003, in a kind of pilgrimage of leftist intellectuals, both Italians and foreigners, to the tomb of Davide Lazzaretti.
- 10 These peasant organizations were also called ‘fasci’, but in order to avoid unfortunate confusion I prefer to use the term ‘leagues’, which figures in Hobsbawm’s book.

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ABSTRACT – Thanks to the problematic of millenarianism, Eric Hobsbawm's historiography incorporates all the richness of socio-cultural subjectivity – the depth of beliefs, feelings and emotions – into his analysis of historical events, which, from this viewpoint, are no longer perceived simply as products of the 'objective' interplay of economic or political forces. Although he makes a careful distinction between primitive millenarianisms and modern revolutionary movements, Hobsbawm nevertheless shows the elective affinity between them. This does not mean that all revolutionary movements are millenarian in the strict sense or – which is even worse – that they are connected to a primitive type of chiliasm. All the same, the affinity between them is a basic fact in the history of peasant revolts against capitalist modernization. This is one of the most interesting research hypotheses outlined by Hobsbawm in his work from that period. He illustrated his idea in two fascinating case studies: rural anarchism in Andalusia and the Sicilian peasant leagues, both arising at the end of the nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth.

KEYWORDS: Millenarism, Chiliasm, Peasantry, Revolutions, Capitalism.

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