For a Zapatista Style Postmodernist Perspective

by Roger Burbach

The left is on the brink of collapse. It has very little influence in the arena of mass politics while fewer and fewer people are interested in Marxist journals, books, and intellectual discourses. In 1982 Michael Ryan, in a book written to find common ground between Marxism and postmodernism, noted that "millions have been killed because they were Marxists; no one will be obliged to die because s/he is a deconstructionist." Thirteen years later there are few who will die for Marxism. Postmodernism certainly has not replaced it as a banner for life and death struggles, but given postmodernity's impact on popular culture, it is conceivable that a larger number would rush to defend postmodernism than Marxism. Like it or not the collapse of communism and the national liberation movements has led to a global debacle for popular and progressive forces as well as Marxists who have often led and sustained these movements. This crisis should compel us to look closely at postmodernism to draw out what may be useful. My own initial efforts at this endeavor appeared in New Left Review in "Roots of the Postmodern Rebellion in Chiapas." It sparked a rebuke from Daniel Nugent, who declared in Monthly Review's special issue on Marxism and postmodernism that my article is "symptomatic" of what has gone wrong with "northern intellectuals."

Before trying to defend myself against Nugent's specific charges, it is important to discuss some issues that Marxists should

Roger Burbach is director of the Center for the Study of the Americas based in Berkeley, CA. Email censa@igc.apc.org.
take seriously before engaging in an all out assault on postmodernism. In particular, the postmodernist critique of the Enlightenment merits careful consideration. The thinking of Marx, Engels, and most subsequent Marxist theorists and strategists is strongly imbued with the idea of progress, and an idealist conception of the perfectibility of humanity. The fountainhead of the Marxist project, the Communist Manifesto, with its argument for clear, concise stages of history culminating in a communist society in the not-to-distant future is strongly influenced by the mechanistic world view of eighteenth century philosophers.

Much of what has gone wrong with Marxism in the twentieth century harks back to its flawed philosophic roots in the Enlightenment. As Irwin Silber notes in Socialism: What Went Wrong?, “historical materialism is founded on the assumption of the virtues of limitless progress in human domination of nature and the inexhaustibility of productive resources.” When Stalin decreed “the great turn” towards full state ownership and central planning in the Soviet Union in 1929, he in effect jettisoned the democratic agenda of Marxism while rushing the Soviet Union headlong on the road to industrialization, progress and modernization, regardless of the human or environmental costs. Of course this vulgar application of Marxism does not render the Marxist tradition of analysis invalid. As Paul Sweezy and Harry Magdoff state in their editorial notes introducing the special issue on Marxism and postmodernity, historical materialism is “the firm foundation on which all that is best in social sciences has been and continues to be based.” Many of the articles in the issue point out that Marxism as a tool of analysis remains as useful today as in decades past. John Bellamy Foster in “Marx and the Environment” shows that although Communist governments did rape nature, both Marx and Engels were cognizant of the dialectical relationship between industry and the environment. They did not believe nature was a tabula rasa that could be used and abused at will. And Carol A. Stabile, in “Postmodernism, Feminism, and Marx” demonstrates that Marxism provides a much more powerful framework than postmodernism for deciphering how women are exploited in today's world. The crisis of contemporary Marxism is not to be found in its analytical capabilities precisely because it is a dialectical, open system of analysis that even allows us to dispute and discard many of the positions taken by Marx and Engels. It is rather the collapse of actually existing socialism in the twentieth century that has thrown us into crisis. We may insist that our critique of capitalism is the most valid one around, but if Marxists have no capacity to link up socialism with concrete experiments or broad-
based social movements, than socialism or communism, as Marx and Engels described them in the Communist manifesto, are in effect stripped of the social actors that moved these historic projects forward. Some Marxists argue that the communist or national liberation movements were misguided or fundamentally flawed and thus socialism and Marxism deserve another chance. The reality however is that the mass of humanity is not interested in giving socialism that chance. From 1917 to 1991, history provided socialism with one opportunity after another to prove itself. The Bolshevik revolution, the liberation of China and the subsequent Maoist experiment in permanent revolution, the Vietnamese war of national liberation, the Cuban revolution, the liberation of the Portuguese colonies, the Nicaraguan revolution, and even Gorbachev’s efforts to reform communism from above—all these experiments and others came up short, and because of this generalized failure socialism as we know it no longer has any mystique or capacity to mobilize broad sectors of humanity. We have to accept the fact that the Marxist project for revolution launched by the Communist manifesto is dead. There will certainly be revolutions (the Iranian revolution is probably a harbinger of what to expect in the short term), but they will not follow in the Marxist tradition begun by the First International. It is this view of twentieth century history that led another Marxist, Eric Hobsbawm to declare in his monumental tome, The Age of Extremes, A History of the World, 1914-1991, that “the past . . . has lost its role, in which the old maps and charts which guided human beings, singly and collectively, no longer represent the landscape through which we move.” In the Monthly Review special issue on postmodernity, Justin Rosenberg is determined to demonstrate that Hobsbawm’s pessimism should not be linked to the “intellectual and political skepticism of postmodernism.” Hobsbawm’s loss of faith “is not wholly warranted,” declares Rosenberg; socialism in fact now has a real future since the Soviet Union is no longer around to “discredit” it.

This is an idealist position. It is intellectual whistling in the wind. The process of globalization under capitalism is generating enormous misery, deprivation, and violence. But it is highly unlikely that the new “wretched of the earth” will turn to Marxism or the national liberation movements for salvation. We are in an age where a modern form of barbarism is a much more likely outcome of late capitalism’s ruthless exploitation of the globe.

As Eduardo Galeano notes, a “culture of violence” is rapidly assuming global proportions. Walden Bello in Dark Victory declares:
Barbarism stares us in the face in many guises—in clean-shaven tech-nowarriors who manage, from Washington, the death of hundreds of thousands in Middle Eastern battlefields that they experience as sanitized digital images in electronic monitors; in Christian Serbs who rape Muslim women en masse and depopulate Muslim villages in the name of ‘ethnic cleansing’; in neo-Nazi German Youth who burn down the homes of Turkish guest laborers; in French rightists who advocate mass deportation of undocumented Third World workers to preserve the ‘purity’ of French culture; in American fundamentalists who have declared moral and cultural war on blacks, Third World immigrants, the women’s movement.

It is this violence and growing suffering that drives me and others to search for a new world view, one that derives some insights from postmodernist thought. I am not arguing that we should accept the relativist school of postmodernism which holds that there are no historical truths, nor as some postmodernists assert, that any broad movements for social and revolutionary change inevitably lead to new forms of repression. Nor do I believe that postmodernism will have anything like the intellectual staying power of Marxism. A decade or two from now we will in all probability not be using postmodernism as a major point of philosophic or intellectual reference. But today it is raising questions that we need to consider and incorporate into any analysis of what is wrong with the world.

What I find particularly useful in postmodernism at this ideological juncture is its view that there are no absolute laws of history as well as its contention that modernism and the faith in progress that began in the age of Enlightenment are at the root of the disasters that have wracked humanity throughout this century. It is also important to recognize that modernism is the antagonist of postmodernism, and the fact that modernity is inextricably linked to capitalism and globalization provides an opening that Marxists should be able to breach. When modernity is challenged, one is in effect “deconstructing” the world that capitalism has created over the past five centuries.

The logic of this postmodernist position does not permit us to stop with a critique of capitalism. Twentieth century communism and the national liberation movements also tied their destinies to the gods of progress and modernization. As such they cannot be the building blocks of our struggles for new societies to replace the capitalist order. We have to begin anew. Or as Ronald Aronson declares in After Marxism, “we are on our own,” we have few if any guideposts from the socialist past that help us envision the new societies.

This is why in studying the EZLN I attempted to decipher what in it is postmodernist, in particular what marks a break with past
liberation movements and their heavy-handed approach to modernization. While Nugent says that my article illustrates the “absurdities” to which postmodern analysis can lead, he also admits that my essay “presents a compelling, competent and concise description” of what led to the rebellion in 1994. His attack focuses almost exclusively on the opening and closing paragraphs of my article where I lay out a postmodernist context for looking at the Zapatista movement.

His first contention is that it is impossible to call the EZLN a postmodern movement because “their vocabulary is so patently modernist and their practical organization so emphatically pre-modern.” He rhetorically asks if postmodernism means that the Zapatistas’ “demands include a modem and VCR in ever Jacale or adobe hut in Mexico?” Or if the Zapatistas are truly postmodernists, why didn’t they chose a name like “Cyberwarriors of the South”?

Clearly Nugent is identifying postmodernism with what passes as a variant of it in our movie theaters and science fiction novels. Few serious postmodernists argue that postmodernism is linked to the use of VCR’s or cyberspace. Nor does a social movement have to call itself postmodernist in order to be characterized as such.

Nugent also tends to see potential postmodernists lurking wherever the internet or new communications technology exists. This approach leads him to totally distort an article by Deedee Halleck in NACLA’s Report on the Americas. Entitled “Zapatistas On-Line,” Halleck’s piece points out that the Zapatistas and many of their sympathizers in Mexico and the United States have creatively used their access to email, modems, and the internet to keep the world abreast of EZLN communiques, political developments, and military aggression by the Mexican government. Halleck doesn’t even use the word postmodernism in her article in discussing these resourceful uses of communications, but Nugent insists that this type of analysis “asserts the fundamental ‘postmodernity’ of the EZLN” and does not really “analyze ‘actual events’ in Chiapas.” Even more insidious from Nugent’s perspective is that this kind of interpretation enables “some intellectuals to appropriate these events” at the expense of the Zapatistas.

Contrary to Nugent’s assertions, Halleck and I are concerned with “actual events” as well as the new politics that may be emerging in southern Mexico. My visit to Chiapas and conversations in the communities led me to understand that something new and different is going on that we have to address if we are from the north or the south. There is indeed a “pre-modern” character to these Indian cultures that helps them persevere and confront the forms of modernization imposed on them by the Mexican state and the new
variant of U.S. imperialism, the North American Free Trade Agreement. They want to build new, equitable societies that will enable their Indian cultures and families to survive while they till their lands communally, using ecologically sound and sustainable practices. This is what makes them postmodernists.

I also came back understanding that the EZLN has assimilated some of the lessons and mistakes of past national liberation movements. Marcos's use of the title "subcomandante" is clearly an ironic spoofing of the pretentiousness of many past revolutionary leaders. More importantly, the politics of the EZLN attempts to move beyond that of other liberation movements. Their impact on Mexico and the world does not come from "the power of the barrel of a gun." In their uprising on January 1, 1994 many had wooden guns, and it is widely recognized that, if given the green light, the Mexican federal army could eliminate most of the Zapatista armed units in days, if not hours. The EZLN's real power lies in its political message and in its ability to use the media and a global forum to get that message out. Its strength also derives from its defense of the Indians' cultures and societies, and in the Zapatistas' efforts to build a broad grass roots alliance in Mexican civil society that challenges the PRI bureaucracy. This is a postmodern approach that goes beyond the "normative politics" of previous liberation movements.

Of course there are orthodox, modernist tendencies in the EZLN and the Zapatista movement. They, like many social and political movements that mark a break with the past contain something of the old and the new. But it is notable that no serious political analyst of the right or left is calling the Zapatista movement Marxist or socialist, simply because these labels just don't fit. The important fact is that the EZLN is searching for a new path that takes us beyond traditional politics.

The limits imposed by Nugent's commitment to orthodoxy and modernity are compounded by his failure to recognize that there are very distinctive schools of postmodernist thought. At one point Nugent states that "since one of the major conceits [sic?] of postmodern discourse is that capitalism doesn't exist, at least as a systematic totality, it hardly makes sense to talk about a postmodern anticapitalism."

While the format of my article did not enable me to undertake a discussion of what I accept or reject about postmodernist thought, I do state in my first footnote that my view of postmodernism derives in large part from David Harvey's, *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Harvey links much of the postmodernist critique to the current stage of global capitalism, particularly the transition from the Fordist
model of accumulation to flexible accumulation. Beyond Harvey, Nugent's assertion that postmodernism is an "intellectual fashion" limited mainly to "discursive practices" is contradicted by another postmodernist work with an anti-capitalist perspective—Edward Soja's *Postmodern Geographies*. Soja, in staking out his postmodernism, argues that Ernest Mandel's *Late Capitalism*, with its discussion of "uneven and combined" development, is an important text in postmodernist thought.

As Daniel Singer notes, "history, far from coming to a stop is quickening pace. But the left is bewildered. Its project has to be reinvented." At present the left doesn't even have a new, compelling label or concept to describe the project it is trying to reinvent. Whatever the label, it will have to be developed through practice rather than by proclaiming it as our banner from the start. Until then we will need to be postmodernists in the sense that we discuss the particularities of the new project, using specific, activating concepts such as participatory democracy, human rights, environmentalism, feminism, economic democracy, sexual liberation, social justice, ethnic rights, local power, and worker's power.

In another work I use the term "postmodern socialisms" to conceptualize what we may be about—"socialisms" because of the tremendous political, cultural, and economic diversity of the societies that we have to work with. There may be no singular model or path that emerges. A great deal of flexibility and experimentation will be needed as we search for new options in the wake of the collapse of communism. Unless we find a way to create a new historic project that includes the masses of humanity, we, and not the capitalists, will be relegated to the dustbin of history.

NOTES

2. The growing pervasiveness of postmodernist terms is illustrated by the coincidence that on the day I received my copy of the *Monthly Review* issue on postmodernism the morning newspaper ran a "Calvin and Hobbes" cartoon in which Calvin proclaims that his sidewalk scribbling is "suburban postmodernist" art. He would rather be a "neo-deconstructivist," but his mom won't let him.
Marxism And Postmodernism: A Reply to Roger Burbach

by Ellen Meiksins Wood and John Bellamy Foster

As editors of the special July-August 1995 issue of MR on "Marxism and the Postmodern Agenda" we've taken it upon ourselves to write these comments on Roger Burbach's reply to Daniel Nugent. We've done this because Burbach's remarks, though written in part as a reply to Nugent's article, have more to do with the general questions raised by the special issue than with Nugent's discussion of the postmodernist treatment of the Zapatistas. In fact, it still isn't clear, from Burbach's reply, how invoking postmodernism helps us to understand the EZLN. It still isn't clear how Burbach's often interesting and illuminating analysis of conditions in Mexico is clarified rather than obscured by tacking on the postmodernist label. In that respect, it seems to us that his reply has simply left Nugent's criticisms unanswered. Instead, Burbach focuses his attention on the much larger issue of Marxism and postmodernism.
Let's begin with the points of agreement between us and Burbach. He actually provides an eloquent defense of Marxism: he agrees with Paul Sweezy and Harry Magdoff that historical materialism is still the best foundation for the social sciences; he agrees with John Foster that Marx and Engels had deep insights into the connection between industry and the environment (how, by the way, does Burbach square this with his comments about historical materialism and its alleged assumption about the "virtues of limitless progress in the domination of nature," and so on?); he even agrees with Carol Stabile that Marxism (to quote Burbach) "provides a much more powerful framework than postmodernism for deciphering how women are exploited in today's world." As a "tool of analysis," Marxism is, in fact, "as useful today as in decades past." Postmodernism, he assures us, will have nothing like the staying power of Marxism, and a decade or two from now, we'll more or less forget about it. By the time he finishes praising Marxism, not only for its traditional critique of capitalism but for its deeper insights into "postmodern" issues like ecology and gender, it's hard to know what's left of postmodernism as a way of understanding the world.

It would be one thing if Burbach had confined himself to claiming that the Marxist revolutionary project, as distinct from Marxism as a "tool of analysis," has been overtaken by history. There is, of course, a lot to be said against that proposition, and we intend to make one or two points about it here in a moment. But at least the proposition would be understandable. The trouble is that Burbach, in spite of everything he says in favor of Marxism, seems to be making claims for postmodernism as a better way (at least temporarily) of understanding where we are today, and here his argument really comes unstuck.

One major problem is his uncertainty about what he means by postmodernism. On the one hand, although he repudiates the "relativist school of postmodernism," he uncritically repeats some of its main platitudes about the "Enlightenment project." It simply isn't good enough to say, for example, that "modernism and the faith in progress that began in the age of Enlightenment are at the root of the disasters that have wracked humanity throughout this century." There is undoubtedly a lot to be criticized in Enlightenment theories of history and progress (as Marx himself, of course, was profoundly aware); but the historical vacuity (not to mention the "idealism") of this proposition is surely evident the moment we place, say, the ideas of Condorcet in the balance against the complex historical forces that gave rise to capitalism, or the specificities of German history which produced Nazism.
On the other hand, Burbach invokes people like David Harvey to illustrate the kind of postmodernism he has in mind. But this example reveals substantial confusion on Burbach's part. We should probably apologize for not taking up this issue in the introduction. Perhaps we took too much for granted, but it should be clear to someone as familiar with the literature as Burbach seems to be that there is a huge difference between "postmodernism" as an intellectual current and the position of someone like David Harvey or Frederic Jameson, Marxists who are fiercely critical of "postmodernism" but who use the concept of "postmodernity" to identify a historical moment in the development of contemporary capitalism and associate with it certain cultural tendencies, like postmodernism. We may want to take issue, on historical grounds, with their own accounts of "postmodernity," or their explanations of the stages of capitalism in general; but the very fact that it is possible to engage them on that historical terrain, to argue with them about history, already sets them miles apart from "postmodernism." So, for that matter, does their treatment of postmodernism itself as a cultural expression of specific material conditions. And so, too, does their insistence on the systemic unity of capitalism as a "totalizing" system—something for which they are sharply criticized by postmodernists. One of the dominant themes of postmodernism, as Nugent pointed out, is indeed to deny the "systemic totality" of capitalism.

These two intellectual stances—postmodernism and the Marxist analysis of "postmodernity"—are incompatible and mutually exclusive, yet there is a slippage in Burbach's argument from one to the other. We suspect there is a more fundamental problem underlying this slippage, and this has to do with the question of history. Burbach writes that what he finds "particularly useful in postmodernism at this ideological juncture is its view that there are no absolute laws of history." It's not clear whether he means that Marxism does imply such absolute laws (if he does he is plainly wrong, but that's another story). The real problem, though, is that the very essence of postmodernism is not just a repudiation of absolutist history but of any history at all.

Burbach doesn't really seem to recognize the differences between a trenchant historical critique of capitalism (such as Marxism supplies) and the kind of "deconstruction of modernity" (to use his words) effected by postmodernists—which is, precisely, neither historical nor a critique. It is, in fact, a denial that any historical understanding, let alone critique, is possible. The postmodernist "deconstruction of modernity" does not, as Burbach seems to think, create some kind of opening for Marxist critique. On the contrary,
it rules out Marxism or any other attempt at systematic explanation of social and historical conditions. For that matter, postmodernism is not, as Burbach suggests, an "antagonist" of capitalism at all. It is not only a cultural expression of capitalism (as Harvey and others have pointed out) but a more or less wholesale capitulation to it.

Or maybe Burbach does know the difference between postmodernist "deconstruction" and historical critique but is simply opting for the former. Such a repudiation of historical (never mind materialist) understanding would help to explain his remarks about the Enlightenment. It might also account for his curious introductory comments about the death of Marxism as a political project. Few today would die for Marxism, he tells us; and "given postmodernity's impact on popular culture [here he invokes a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon], it is conceivable that a larger number would rush to defend postmodernism than Marxism." However much Marxism may have lost its mass appeal, there is something comical (has Burbach missed the irony in Calvin and Hobbes?) about the vision of people "rushing to defend" postmodernism.

Let's be brutal about this: postmodernism as an intellectual current is about as academic as you can get; and the more postmodernists claim to represent the voice of "popular culture," the more impenetrable and inaccessible their "discourses" become. Burbach freely concedes that "postmodernism certainly has not replaced [Marxism] as a banner for life and death struggles." That's putting it mildly. Postmodernism is, to put it bluntly, a call to inaction and a surrender to capitalist triumphalism. Those of us in academia who face it every day find its appeal to our students and colleagues deeply depressing. But there is at least some consolation in the fact that its esoteric and exclusionary posture, not to mention its divorce from reality (reality?) and its political emptiness, must ultimately limit its practical efficacy.

We have to distinguish here between postmodernism and the real concerns into which it has tapped. As we said in the introduction to the special issue, we need to "identify the real problems to which current intellectual fashions offer false—or no—solutions, and in so doing to challenge the limits they impose on action and resistance." Burbach hints at some of these real problems when he insists that "we need to be postmodernists in the sense that we discuss the particularities of the new project using specific activating concepts such as participatory democracy, human rights, environmentalism, feminism, economic democracy, sexual liberation, social justice, ethnic rights, local power, and worker's power." Burbach is probably aware that there is nothing particularly "postmodernist" about these
concepts or the movements that they represent. If anything, they are quintessentially "modernist." Most of them are deeply rooted in the dreaded Enlightenment values, and all of them have a long history that is part of the general history of the left. There is no question that such issues are central to the struggle for a more humane society.

But if there is nothing especially postmodernist about Burbach's laundry list of "activating concepts," what is postmodernist about his formulation is its insistence on the fragmentation of the left's political project. His catalogue of disconnected concepts is intended as a substitute for Marxism's "totalizing" vision. If it were only meant as a demand for greater flexibility or recognition of diversity, no sensible socialist could take issue with it. But Burbach's catalogue is meant to replace a political project unified by its opposition to capitalism. There is no hint in his list that what is at issue is a struggle against capitalism, nor, for that matter, is there any unambiguous reference to class struggle (beyond the rather vague appeal to "workers' power").

The whole object of the postmodernist exercise is to fragment oppositional politics into many disconnected pieces. The irony is that, by endorsing this parcellization of politics, and avoiding any hint of wholesale opposition to capitalism, Burbach stays within the domain of acceptable liberal discourse (what C. Wright Mills called "liberal practicality"). He also has something in common with those traditional forms of liberal "pluralism" which denied that there was any concentration of class power or any systemic source of domination in capitalist society. Maybe the new postmodernist discourse, as represented by Burbach, is after all "anti-modernist" only in the sense that it rejects modernism in one of its forms—Marxism—while adopting the universalist language of another—liberalism, the ruling form of the modernist project.

In any case, we need to do more than "use activating concepts." We need to understand the historical, material conditions that block the realization of the objectives which these concepts represent and the kinds of transformations that would make their realization possible. Any serious effort to trace our present condition to its historical roots is bound to take us back to capitalism and its systemic logic. Here postmodernism is, to say the least, no help. It is, in fact, a positive liability. What a pity it is to find a committed and insightful radical like Roger Burbach muddying the waters by embracing the postmodernist fragmentation of both theory and practice which weakens our capacity to understand and to resist the capitalist system.
In one sense this tendency of Burbach and others to change flags from Marxism to postmodernism is understandable. The socialist project is certainly in deep trouble, and we have a lot of rebuilding to do, both to reinvigorate the Marxist critique and to reestablish the ties between theory and practice, finding new ways of mobilizing people into the anti-capitalist project. But let’s put things into perspective. Whatever we may think about the collapse of Communism—whether it was a massive setback or the disappearance of a liability—the truth is that (to quote Justin Rosenberg) “the real ground of socialist politics was never the existence of the Soviet Union but rather the existence of capitalism.” Socialists today may have a wide range of different views on the historic role of the Soviet Union, but socialism always was, and remains, about capitalism. Socialism is, and always was, the specific antithesis to capitalism. As long as there is capitalism, the socialist project will have a solid historical foundation.

It would be a mistake to abandon the historical and theoretical basis of the classical critique of capitalism—that is, historical materialism itself—for the sake of an ahistorical “deconstruction” of modernity, and to do so mainly on the grounds that postmodernism is a “compelling label” with a fashionable “mystique” that Marxism now lacks. If we allow ourselves to compromise our understanding for the sake of short-term political—or, more precisely, academic—gain we will only contribute to the further dissolution of the left. The road back to an effective connection between theory and practice will then be that much longer.
On Hobsbawm's Pessimism: A Reply to Justin Rosenberg

by David Englestein

There are positive features in the review of Eric Hobsbawm's *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991* by Justin Rosenberg (MR, July/August 1995). My fundamental difference with the reviewer is on the question of whether Hobsbawm is "pessimistic," "dispirited," and "despairing." On occasion the reviewer does modify one or another of these words, as "almost despairing" or "his pessimism is not wholly warranted." In my opinion, as well as in the documentation I will provide, Rosenberg does not make his case. He mistakes realism for pessimism and labels sobriety as despair. And, unfortunately, because of carelessness, if not worse, he distorts a key quote from Hobsbawm in his concluding rush to score a point.

Relevant quotes from Hobsbawm's book do not reflect pessimism and despair. For example:

As the 1980s gave way to the 1990s, the mood of those who reflected on the century's past and future was a growing fin-de-siècle gloom. From the vantage point of the 1990s, the Short Twentieth Century passed through a brief Golden Age, on the way from one era of crises to another, into an unknown and problematic but not necessarily apocalyptic future. . . . The only completely certain generalization about history is that, so long as there is a human race, it will go on." (p. 6)

Hobsbawm concludes: "The collapse of one part of the world revealed the malaise of the rest." (p. 10) The author declares "that the world crisis was not only general in an economic sense, but equally general in politics." (p. 10) He adds to these conditions of world economics and world politics the social and moral crises. The author ends this introductory chapter with two brief sentences: "Let us hope

David Englestein is grateful to Victoria Byerly, Mary Englestein, and Leon Wofsy who read earlier drafts of this piece and made useful contributions.
it will be a better, more just, and more viable world. The old century has not ended well.” (p. 17)

In his final chapter, “Towards the Millennium,” in a sense, the author repeats what he said in the introductory chapter. “As the millennium approached,” he writes, “it became increasingly evident that the central task (my emphasis) was not to gloat over the corpse of Soviet communism, but to consider, once again, the built-in defects of capitalism.” (p. 574) This statement is more than an adequate reply, incidentally, to Rosenberg’s false accusation that “Hobsbawm has [almost] forgotten that the real ground of socialist politics never was the existence of the Soviet Union but rather the existence of capitalism.”

The book does not have a happy ending. Neither does it have a pessimistic one. It is here, as noted above, that the reviewer allows himself to misquote Hobsbawm’s closing thoughts and at the same time expose the reviewer’s misquotation.

Our world risks both explosion and implosion. It must change. We do not know where we are going. We only know that history has brought us to this point and—if readers share the argument of this book—why. However, one thing is plain. If humanity is to have a recognizable future, it cannot be by prolonging the past or the present. If we try to build the third millennium on that basis, we shall fail. And the price of that failure, that is to say, the alternative to a changed society, is darkness. (p. 585)

To conclude as Rosenberg does that Hobsbawm “ends almost despairingly on the word darkness” is to distort the quote and the thought. One word, “darkness,” does not express the thought of that sentence. Hobsbawm is calling for a changed society—not just once, but twice in the extended quote. And, in the very sentence that ends with “darkness,” that word is the alternative to a changed society that Hobsbawm believes in and calls for.

Profit maximization was necessary for twentieth-century capitalism to survive but Hobsbawm is acutely aware that the cultural revolution was able at the same time to undermine “the inherited historical assets of capitalism . . . the fraying and snapping of the old . . . value systems.” (pp. 342-343) This interpenetration of the cultural with the economic demonstrates Hobsbawm’s creative use of historical materialism at the same time as it refutes the charge of his pessimism.

It is human progress and not human tragedy that Hobsbawm chooses to emphasize (p. 557). At the age of ninety, I join Hobsbawm in his sobriety and realism and in his creative Marxism. I reject the efforts to write him off as a pessimist. It is his daring use of the historical materialist method that will challenge Marxists for years to come.