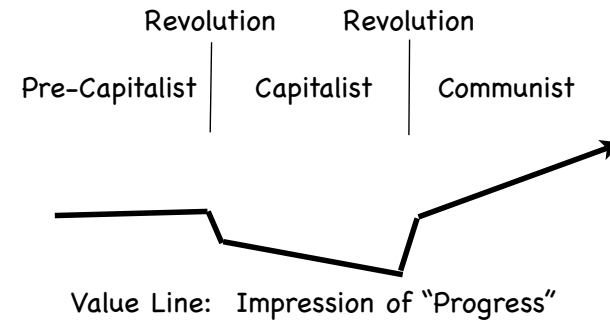


The World We Have Lost

Peter Laslett and the Cambridge Group

Basic Marxist Periodization



Historical Assumptions of "Old School" Marxism (As needed to understand Laslett)

- 1 All of history can be understood according to the division between "classes" of privilege and means, and classes lacking privilege and means.
- 2 The Pre-Capitalist Era was an age of oppression and repression of the lower class by Church and Nobility.
- 3 With the rise of a class-conscious "middle-class" a revolution overthrowing the old "upper-class" was inevitable.
- 4 This represented a worsening of conditions for the "lower" or "working" class, as "capital" took over as the sole motor of social change.
- 5 A future revolution was inevitable, when "liberalism" would be replaced by "communism."
- 6 This would result in a "one-class society" as the means of production would be possessed alike by all.
- 7 Intellectuals may be divided between those who are "aware" of these basic principles of history and those who are ignorant (willfully or not.)

Marxism's unwanted Revolution

- At the dawn of the 1960s the discipline of history was dominated, in academia, by Marxist paradigms.
- Marxism itself was facing a revolution as an intellectual paradigm.
- Laslett and the Cambridge Group (which he co-founded with Wrigley) became the most widely recognized challenge to the "Old School."
- The foundations were laid, however, by serious Marxist academics themselves.
- THE ANNALES SCHOOL: French trend in historiography.
 - "Broad History" developed in the 1930s-'50s. Attempted to cross all historical specialization and periods.
 - Turned from assumptions and specialization to a meticulously rigorous look at all legitimate primary sources.
 - Included a focus on statistics and statistical validity which had generally been lacking among historians.
 - Required a small army working simultaneously and drew conclusions only when data was available from many quarters.
- When the early modern and medieval periods were considered, most assumptions about the "past" were being seriously qualified by statistical evidence which permitted very little room for alternative interpretations.

Laslett and the Cambridge Group

- Eventually this form of rigorous social history would collapse under its own weight -- the demand on resources outstripped what academia and society were willing to devote to history.
- Moreover, it was clear by the 1980's that the Marxist ideology which had fueled the birth of the Annales School had taken a blow from the findings of social history.
- Laslett and the Cambridge Group had as their goal an honest look at the evidence, with conclusions drawn from evidence, and a conscious rejection of prior assumptions.
- The methodology of the Cambridge Group focused on statistics drawn especially from parish records, supported by other sources which had been overlooked by prior historians.
- As a result, the so-called "common people," or "proletariat" of Marx and Engels was revealed as something other than the voiceless, oppressed masses that the Manifesto required.
- (The true nature of pre-modern society is still a matter of debate, but the findings of the Cambridge Group meant that assumptions had to give way to historical evidence.)

The World We Have Lost

- Laslett's book was a manifesto in its own right.
- The "orthodoxy" of Old School Marxism was under attack with its first publication in 1963.
- Others would take up the cause, and the "Third Edition" is a much revised version of the original academic bombshell.
- Nevertheless, much of the book retains the "challenge to authority" character which it had in 1963.
- The first chapter, for example, remains a rhetorical device to pad the charge that would follow: in it Laslett concedes as much as possible to his Old School Marxist colleagues.
- (They weren't impressed -- the rest of the book contradicts even some of the points which Laslett seems willing to concede in Chapter 1.)
- Laslett's conclusions have not been universally accepted, but his findings (from the evidence) have.
- As a result, those who love him and those who hate him have to reckon with him.
- As a further result, as Laslett's methods spread to other historical eras and locations Old School Marxism waned.
- (Replaced by many trends: Neo-Marxism, Neo-Historicism, Post-Modernism, etc.)

Some of the Challenges in the Book:

- There was no operative "class system" prior to the modern era.
- Capitalism cannot be tied to a single class in the pre-modern world: rich and poor alike participated.
- The economic pressure toward industrialization came from the working poor as much as from anybody.
- The mess caused by the Industrial Revolution (poverty, social decay, etc.) can be more properly attributed to the social dissolution of the pre-modern "family" lifestyle, than to "capitalism."
- Society was simply not divided enough for revolutions to occur along Marxist lines.
- Life for the poor was simply not as harsh as the Marxist assumptions would have it.
- "We" and "they" crossed the supposed lines of economics. It was geographically conditioned, or centered the community rather than economic class.
- (As an undercurrent) An honest look at history reveals that causation is far too complex to support tidy political ideologies.
- (Another undercurrent) Golden ages are never golden, whether in the "pristine past" or the "industrial future" of Marxism.
- (Neither are "ages" so dark as we would often have them.)

History is not about "Facts"

- History, as a discipline, consists of:
- EVIDENCE
- INTERPRETATION
- The two must not be confused.

Thesis:

- ◉ “The thesis statement represents the author's position and interpretation regarding the subject/content of the writing.” -- Dr. R. Hatch
- ◉ Finding a thesis:
 - ◉ Begin by choosing a topic.
 - ◉ Ask questions (The best thesis is always an answer to a thoughtful and informed question.)
 - ◉ Go to the library and the *library's electronic resources*. (NOT the internet.)
 - ◉ Ask more questions, and take notes on them. (New questions will arise -- if they don't you're not reading carefully.)
 - ◉ Start listing possible answers.
 - ◉ At all points keep track of where you are finding your information.
 - ◉ A thesis without support is a failed thesis.
 - ◉ Be prepared to let your sources shape your thesis.

Cromwell, the Movie:

- ◉ 1970, directed by Ken Hughes. (*Of Human Bondage*, 1964; *Chitty, Chitty, Bang, Bang*, 1968; etc.)
- ◉ Hughes, who was also the writer, regarded this film as a personal mission.
- ◉ Hughes recruited major stars, including: Richard Harris, Alec Guinness, and a young Timothy Dalton.
- ◉ Hughes had been repeatedly rejected by movie companies before Columbia took on the project.
- ◉ 1971, 2 Oscars, for Original Score and Costuming.
- ◉ At the time, critics raved about the battle scenes, as well as the “attention to historical detail.”
- ◉ (More recent critics have been much harsher on the “historical detail” issue.)
- ◉ The significance of this film rests in its continual use in high schools, both in the U.S. and the U.K. as an introduction to the “essential issues” of the English Civil War.
- ◉ It retains a popular following, most of whom regard it as essential viewing for the understanding of the conflict between the “King and the Common Man,” the “dangers of absolute power,” the “eternal cause of the little people,” and any number of other clichés.