

ideas counted for nothing"—who were bred into Stalin's Communist Party by a process of natural selection and who, breeding still, hobble Russia as she stumbles to a civilized society. "It is not so much the particular doctrines of the Communists that cause the trouble here as the fact that the Communists were actually

empowered, and believed themselves entitled, to enforce them in every sphere of life." True enough, discouragingly true. But should there not be mention, in a book with this title, of the *other* Communists, the enlightened, humanist ones; and the non-Communists—doctors, jurists, writers, teachers, builders?

## Social Rebels and Bandits

**PRIMITIVE REBELS: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries** By E. J. Hobsbawm. W. W. Norton. 202 pp \$1.75 paper.

### R. K. WEBB

Mr. Webb is a professor of history at Columbia University. He is the author of *The British Working Class Reader 1790-1848* (Columbia University Press) and his *History of Modern England* will be published late this year. He is the translator of Elie Halévy's *Era of Tyrannies* (Doubleday).

In recent years three Marxist historians have made important contributions to an understanding of the history of the English working classes. George Rudé has brought painstaking archival work to bear on popular disturbances in the pre-industrial era, particularly in his analyses of the mobs that rioted for John Wilkes and Lord George Gordon. E. P. Thompson, in his massive, learned and exasperating book, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), has provided the point of departure for the next generation of historians of working-class movements in the crucial decades between 1790 and 1830. The third historian is E. J. Hobsbawm. He has been present in historians' minds longer than the other two and I, for one, think he wears best and has been the most rewarding. His scholarship has swept much more widely than the work of the other two, his imagination is broader than Rudé's, and he keeps his temper more firmly under control than does Thompson, who repeatedly lessens his authority by sneering at people (past and present) whom he does not like. *Primitive Rebels* (first published in 1959 as *Social Bandits and Primitive Rebels*) is an excellent example of Hobsbawm's strength and weakness, and strength by far predominates.

Hobsbawm has always, I suspect, seen himself as the gadfly of more orthodox historians. His career began with a thesis that said some startling things about the Fabians, whose self-image had been skillfully implanted in the minds of most labor historians, perhaps the greatest victory of Fabian permeation. He boldly attacked—

somewhat correcting rather than destroying—Elie Halévy's famous generalization about the role of Methodism and Evangelicalism in preventing an English revolution; he has been the leading critic of the "optimistic" interpretation of standards of life during the Industrial Revolution. A gadfly darts, stings and usually escapes. So Hobsbawm has darted from subject to subject—happily infusing life, not drawing it—and has artfully dodged most of the attacks on him to return again (as he has done repeatedly in the standard of living debate) or to goad another placid subject into agitation. *Labouring Men*, published last year, shows him doing just this in a collection of articles and (there is no other word for them) fragments that do much to illuminate labor movements and the men who made them.

No one can work very long in social history, particularly in the history of labor movements, without becoming aware of the puzzling recurrence of archaic forms and impulses, sometimes as pre-political movements in a political age, sometimes as survivals within movements already groping their way toward politics. Mr. Hobsbawm's inevitable interest in these phenomena led him to what seems to have been a kind of tangential interest in southern Italy and in Spain. In 1956, he was invited to lecture at the University of Manchester, and he chose to lecture on these continental examples, a commendably bold decision that most historians, preferring the relative safety of their usual fields, would not have taken. With some other material added, *Primitive Rebels* is the result.

*Primitive Rebels* is not exactly a book, if one thinks of a book as a thorough and integrated exploration of a theme; Hobsbawm does label it "studies." The formal analogy that sprang to my mind was one of the long piano works of César Franck. *Primitive Rebels* is really Hobsbawm's *Variations, Aria and Coda*—pleasing, haunting and artfully improvisatory. The *Variations* are arranged according to historical logic, not chronology. He begins with the "social bandit," of whom Robin Hood is the generic type, a phenomenon

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that can exist in its purity only in a peasant society whose interests he defends against outside oppression, and whose dissolution can mean for him only defeat or degradation into true criminality. A similar fate awaited the collective advance on banditry, *mafia*, the second of Hobsbawm's variations, Americans are familiar with one form of its ultimate corruption, but all of us can profit from this penetrating and broadly conceived interpretation of its background. The next three variations deal with millenarianism, a form of social protest more at home in modern society; in Hobsbawm's terminology millenarian movements are revolutionary as bandits and *mafia* are not. His three variations deal with ascending degrees of sophistication and end in politicization: the Lazzaretti of southern Tuscany, so called from Davide Lazzaretti, a messiah who gathered a large following between 1868 and 1878 and whose memory lives in some Italian left-wing movements today, the Spanish anarchists of the late 19th century; and the Sicilian agrarian *fasci*, appearing at the very end of the 19th century and feeding into present-day Italian communism.

An English aria follows, in two parts. The brief chapter on the city mob, a pre-

industrial phenomenon, is brilliant; it necessarily depends much on Rudé's work, but it is a much better introduction to a central element in 18th-century life than Rudé's general assessment in *The Crowd in History* (1964). The chapter on labor sects deals with a curious survival in the industrial era—the linking of religious forms and impulses to what are essentially secular political movements. Finally, the coda is a suggestive consideration of the role of ritual in social movements.

Hobsbawm is frank about the tentative nature of his inquiries, he did not intend to write an integrated or authoritative book. But one cannot help wishing that he had done more. There is very little here in the way of psychological speculation. I am not calling for a full-scale psychological interpretation, but for more emphasis and more curiosity. For example, David Williams, in *The Rebecca Riots* (1955), sought out the psychological dimension in the folk origins of the attacks on Welsh toll gates in the 1840s.

But this fault is minor when set against the stimulation to be found in the provocative and even moving stories that Hobsbawm has so refreshingly chosen to tell.

Currently they are booming. Audiences are increasing rapidly; acting companies are being expanded. Companies are moving from makeshift premises in the suburbs to splendid custom-built theatres downtown (usually in civic arts centers, somewhat on the order of Lincoln Center in New York, which are going up in city after city). The new houses often have twice as many seats as the old, and in several of them provision will be made for a small, flexible second stage for experimental work, especially new plays. Government money from Federal Aid to Education and the National Foundation for the Arts is becoming available. The men who run the resident theatres are young men—most of them in their 30s, some even younger—and they are full of plans and full of confidence.

Of course, some theatres fail to take root, but for every one that dies several more are born. Businessmen and civic leaders have become aware that resident professional theatre is a Good Thing, good for civic pride and good for attracting new industry. (Even if he never goes to the theatre, an executive is glad to be reassured that he is not moving into a cultural desert.) Colleges and universities are becoming increasingly interested in resident theatre; an official of Actors Equity estimates that in the next two years some eleven professional companies will be founded or engaged by academic institutions, in addition to at least four more companies started by nonacademic groups, plus two new summer festival theatres.

It is easy, in this context, to give way to euphoria; but the arts in general have failed to secure an important place in our national life, and the theatre is no exception. If our prosperity holds, the resident professional theatre will prosper also, but if there is a depression these costly institutions are likely to be found expendable. A portent may be found in a recent action of New York's culture-loving Mayor Lindsay, who, faced with a budget crisis, cut by \$100,000 the city's contribution to Joseph Papp's free-admission Shakespeare Festival.

In spite of all the money, all the statistics, and all the very real progress that has been made, professional theatre still reaches only an infinitesimal percentage of the people of the United States and Canada. The new theatres are very small organizations. Except for the Guthrie in Minneapolis, the Vivian Beaumont in Lincoln Center, and a few tourist-oriented summer festival theatres, none of them has an auditorium that can seat as many as 1,000 people. Many can accommodate less than 500. Even the splendid new theatres tend to have only about 800 seats. Yet in these same cities there are usually

## Touring the Hinterland

### JULIUS NOVICK

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A few weeks ago, the headline above the lead article in *Variety* proclaimed, "Hinterland Legits Top Broadway." The article announced that "for the first time since the heyday of stock, there are more professional actors working in regional theatre than in Broadway and touring productions." Clearly something is going on out there in those hinterland legits, and clearly it is something new. My own findings complement *Variety's*. I have just returned from a transcontinental journey in the course of which I visited twenty-three theatres in twenty-one cities from Boston to Los Angeles; about half of these theatres did not exist five years ago. All over this country and Canada, there is professional theatre where for many decades there was little or none.

The new "resident professional theatres," as they are called, aim to become permanent institutions. Most of them maintain a company of actors who remain to-

gether from play to play throughout a season of thirty or forty weeks (with guest performers to play roles that cannot be cast from the company). A core of actors is usually retained from one season to the next, in the hope of developing a genuine ensemble.

These theatres draw very little except their audiences from their communities. Most of the actors come from the New York talent pool. The plays are drawn from the international repertory of classics and respected modern plays, with special attention to what Broadway and off-Broadway have been doing lately. Many theatres feel guilty about not staging enough new plays. They do not, for the most part, bother with the current crop of commercial comedies and musicals, and so do not compete with the road-company houses where those exist.

The theatres are interested in art, not money (though they try not to be self-righteous about it). They are all incorporated as nonprofit institutions, and most of them operate on deficits. They survive by going to the public as Good Causes; they enroll ladies' auxiliaries to help out in annual subscription campaigns, and solicit funds from foundations, from government and from private donors.

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