

OBITUARY

Eric J. Hobsbawm (1917–2012)

I had the luck of belonging to a worldwide generation of historians who revolutionized the writing of history between the 1930s and the historiographical turn of the 1970s, mainly with the help of new links between history and the social sciences. This was not simply a matter of a single ideological school. Rather, it was about the struggle of historical modernity against the old, conventional Rankean historiography, whether under the banner of economic history, of French sociology and geography as in the *Annales*, of Marxism or of Max Weber.¹

This is how Eric Hobsbawm contextualized himself as a historian when he received Honorary Citizenship Status from the city of Vienna in 2008. Indeed, his work is an outstanding and unique contribution to the reorientation of the study and writing of history in the twentieth century. He propagated and practised the transition from social history as a specialization to social history understood as the history of society. He successfully proved that a stringent and explicit Marxist orientation can be compatible with, and instrumental for, studying and writing history of the highest quality. The example of Hobsbawm impressively documents how scholarly excellence and political commitment can be intertwined in a way productive for either side, even if there are tensions between them.

As a widely read historian and as a famous public intellectual, Hobsbawm gained global recognition and impact. At the same time, both his grand oeuvre as a historian and his frequent interventions in the public sphere were anchored in his regional roots and his very specific biography. He was born in 1917 in Alexandria, Egypt, to Jewish parents from England and Austria, raised in Vienna and Berlin, educated at Cambridge, and employed in London, where he spent most of his life, interrupted by countless travels and frequent stays abroad. His cosmopolitan orientation and his global reach squared well with his profile as a central and western European. He did not only study and interpret history, he became a historical figure himself: a unique individual, but thoroughly interconnected with the major developments of his time.

In 1971 Hobsbawm published a seminal article that strongly recommended supplementing the study of specific social historical problems, such as labour, social protest, family, or mentalities, by the comprehensive reconstruction of

1. Gerhard Botz *et al.*, *Geschichte: Möglichkeit für Erkenntnis und Gestaltung der Welt. Zu Leben und Werk von Eric J. Hobsbawm* (Vienna, 2008), p. 74.



Eric Hobsbawm photographed in Amsterdam in September 1985, during his opening address at the symposium, “Internationalism in the Labour Movement before 1940”, on the occasion of the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the IISH.

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whole societies, which would include the study of politics, of the economy, and of culture, but emphasize a social historical approach.² Hobsbawm’s own oeuvre as a historian followed the pattern this article sketched.

Hobsbawm started out as a historian of *specific* social historical problems without necessarily calling what he did “social history”. His first book (1948) assembled extracts from contemporary sources on British labour history from 1880 to 1900.³ The book’s introduction and its

2. Eric J. Hobsbawm, “From Social History to the History of Society”, *Daedalus*, 100 (1971), pp. 20–45; reprinted in *idem*, *On History* (New York, 1997), pp. 71–93.

3. *Idem* (ed.), *Labour’s Turning Point 1880–1900* (London, 1948, 2nd edn Brighton, 1974).

architecture emphasized topics and viewpoints that would be of central interest to Hobsbawm for many years: the relationship between working-class history and labour history, the role of single trades and different work situations, conflict and cooperation, unions, cooperatives and labour parties, social protest, radicalism, and socialism. Working-class and labour history would remain a major focus for Eric Hobsbawm over the decades, and he became particularly interested in one overriding question: What work constellations, social conditions, cultural traditions, experiences, and strategies helped to deepen or overcome the obvious splits between different groups of workers, and either prevented or facilitated the emergence of common perceptions, loyalties, actions, and organizations of workers, i.e. the rise of labour movements as elements of class formation?

In the famous British standard-of-living debate around 1960 Hobsbawm took a moderately sceptical position that rejected the view that the English Industrial Revolution – he always used this term – between the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries had raised the purchasing power and the quality of life of most workers. He pioneered research on the internal differentiations within what he saw as the emerging working class, especially the gap between what was then frequently called the “labour aristocracy” and the majority of less well-situated or unskilled workers. He pursued path-breaking studies on a broad spectrum of topics, ranging from the fate of the tramping artisan and “custom, wages and work-load” via the London labour market to the rise of general labour unions and to religion, radicalism, and the rise of socialism. In the 1970s he tried to include the gender dimension that he had earlier neglected,⁴ in the 1980s he worked on “labour and human rights”, while the topic “Marx and labour” stayed with him throughout his life.

He analysed the tendencies of and limits to working-class formation, very much on empirical grounds and in a non-teleological way that allowed him to diagnose counter-tendencies as well, i.e. class devolution when it took place, as it did in Britain, for example, after World War II, as Hobsbawm observed in the 1970s. He did not fail to draw political conclusions from this finding in his famous lecture “The Forward March of Labour Halted?”. While Hobsbawm’s contributions to this field continued to focus mostly on British examples, he became an unquestioned leader in international working-class and labour history, though not everybody shared his views.⁵

4. See Hobsbawm, *On History*, p. 71, where he expressed his “embarrassed astonishment” that his survey of the state of social history of 1971 “contained no reference at all to women’s history”. He did not mind admitting previous shortcomings and knew how to learn from them.

5. Most of Hobsbawm’s contributions to working-class and labour history appeared in the form of articles and essays. They were reprinted in his widely read books: *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (London, 1964); *Worlds of Labour: Further Studies in the*

Hobsbawm wrote on many other social historical topics. His early works on millenarian movements, brigandage, and social bandits in largely pre-capitalist, rural societies under pressure were path-breaking. He moved in many different directions and published, for example, on the English middle class in the nineteenth century, and, recently, on the transnational spread of academic institutions and scientific knowledge over the past few centuries.⁶ The spectrum of Hobsbawm's intellectual interests was immense, his curiosity insatiable, and he communicated with ease in many Western languages. He was always more than a specialized social historian.

At Birkbeck College, London, where he started to teach in 1947, he was expected to offer broad, non-specialized courses. As an active member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) since the mid-1930s, he was motivated to deal with broad, present-related problems. Together with Maurice Dobb, Christopher Hill, Rodney Hilton, V.G. Kiernan, George Rudé, E.P. and Dorothy Thompson, and others, he participated in the influential Communist Party Historians' Group (1946–1956), which certainly stood for social historical approaches, but in a very broad, non-specialized, historical-materialist way. In 1952 the Group founded *Past and Present: A Journal of Historical Studies*, which pursued an interdisciplinary programme, albeit with history as its core. Hobsbawm was one of its first editors.

These Marxist historians saw the French *Annales* historians as their allies. They regarded themselves as engaged in a

[...] battle between the conventional assumption that “history is past politics”, either within nation-states or in their relations to each other, and a history of structures and changes of societies and cultures [which they favoured], between history as narrative and history as analysis and synthesis [which they aimed at], between those who thought it impossible to generalize about human affairs in the past and those who [like these Marxist historians] thought it essential.⁷

By lecturing and writing history, they hoped to reach a broad public and contribute to its education. It is in this intellectual and political context that Hobsbawm and his colleagues became interested in the “crisis of the seventeenth century” and the English Revolution of 1640, in the history

History of Labour (London, 1984); “The Forward March of Labour Halted?” (1978), in *Politics for a Rational Left: Political Writings 1977–1988* (London, 1989); “Marx and Labour: The Long Century” (2000–2011), in *How to Change the World: Reflections on Marx and Marxism* (New Haven, CT, 2011), pp. 399–419.

6. Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Manchester, 1959); *idem*, *Bandits* (London, 1969). Along similar lines see also *idem*, *Captain Swing* (London, 1968) (with George Rudé); *idem*, “The Example of the English Middle Class”, in Jürgen Kocka and Allan Mitchell (eds), *Bourgeois Society in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 127–150; *idem*, “From West European to World Science: Seventeenth-Twentieth Centuries”, in Peter H. Reill and Balázs A. Szelényi (eds), *Cores, Peripheries, and Globalization: Essays in Honour of Ivan T. Berend* (Budapest, 2011), pp. 255–270.

7. Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (New York, 2002), p. 285.

of capitalism and social classes, as well as in “progressive” and “radical” interpretations of British history. They explicitly related the past as they saw it to the period in which they lived.⁸

It is in this context that Hobsbawm developed his understanding of social history as history of society, a framework that he used for writing his magisterial four-volume synthesis on “The Making of the Modern World”.⁹ The first three volumes deal with the “long nineteenth century”, starting with the “dual revolution” in France and England in the late eighteenth century and ending with World War I. “Essentially the central axis round which I have tried to organize the history of the century is the triumph and transformation of capitalism in the historically specific forms of bourgeois society in its liberal version”,¹⁰ he wrote.

Each volume follows a classical Marxist structure. Each starts with a chapter on the economic foundations of the period; there follows a narrative on political developments as well as an analysis of social relations, with an emphasis on class; finally, there is a survey of the cultural and intellectual scenes, including the sciences and the arts. The fourth volume deals with the “short twentieth century”, from its catastrophic start in 1914 to the fall of the communist camp and the dissolution of the Soviet Union 1989–1991. It contains less on social classes, and ends with a very gloomy outlook. Whereas the first three volumes have much to say on the dark aspects of the long nineteenth century, they are basically informed by an element of hope as to the long-term possibilities of historical progress.

The four volumes have given rise to serious questions. Do the deep differences and tensions between the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution in England really allow one to speak of a “dual revolution” in the late eighteenth century? Given the long persistence of the old regime in many ways (Arno Mayer), can one defend the thesis of a bourgeois hegemony in the second half of the nineteenth century? Is it really justified to contrast the “golden years” between 1950 and 1973 with the period of deterioration (“landslide”) between 1973 and the early 1990s? This relates to the much-debated way in which Hobsbawm dealt with Stalin’s dictatorship and the Soviet Union’s collapse, which he tended to regard as a loss. In several respects Hobsbawm deals with history on a global scale (particularly by taking seriously colonialism, imperialism, and their

8. Eric J. Hobsbawm, “The General Crisis of the European Economy in the 17th Century”, *Past and Present*, 5 (1954), pp. 33–53; *idem*, “The Crisis of the 17th Century”, *Past and Present*, 6 (1954), pp. 44–65. For context see Gregory Elliott, *Hobsbawm: History and Politics* (London, 2010), pp. 28–33.

9. Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789–1848* (London, 1962); *idem*, *The Age of Capital: 1848–1875* (London, 1975); *idem*, *The Age of Empire: 1875–1914* (London, 1987); *idem*, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London, 1994).

10. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire: 1875–1914*, pp. 8–9.

consequences), but his overall approach was basically Eurocentric. Both the US and East Asia remain on the margins.

Still, this tetralogy is an admirable achievement. It has “no equal as a systematic account of how the contemporary world was made” (Perry Anderson). It is the “best starting point I know for anyone who wishes to begin studying modern history” (Niall Ferguson). The volumes are beautifully written; they have reached broad audiences in many parts of the world and become standard reading in countless history courses. They are full of information, intellectual surprises, and wit. They are based on an admirably rich knowledge of many spheres of life in many countries and different cultures. They are well structured, incorporating analytical questions and differentiated arguments. The social historical dimension is central, guiding this great synthetic achievement. Hobsbawm once remarked that “the really big questions [...] have tended to frighten off the professionals in the [historical] trade, increasingly shackled by the double fetters of primary research and specialised knowledge, i.e. generalised ignorance”. He successfully tackled big questions with much courage, analytical power, and elegance, in so doing moving beyond the profession’s mainstream.¹¹

Eric Hobsbawm spent his childhood in Vienna, then one of Europe’s most anti-Semitic cities. By the time he was fourteen he had lost his parents, and from 1931 to 1933 he lived in Berlin with his aunt and uncle. Here he experienced not only two intensive years at a good *gymnasium*, but also the deep crisis and the collapse of the Weimar Republic. He watched closely the Nazis’ takeover of power. He was deeply moved and politicized, joining a communist student group. When he was twenty-five and at Cambridge, he became an active member of the CPGB. In 1956, unlike many of his friends and colleagues, he remained in the party even though it supported the Soviet invasion of Budapest and although major Stalinist crimes had been made public.¹²

Over the decades, Hobsbawm’s political position certainly changed. In the 1970s he moved close to the PCI and its Eurocommunist programme. In the 1980s he publicly supported the leadership of the British Labour Party against the challenges it faced from its extreme left wing. In many ways, he became close to adopting social democratic positions, but he remained firmly on the left. He continued to express fundamental criticisms of capitalism and bourgeois society, actively publicizing his views in the

11. For an excellent review of the four volumes see Perry Anderson, “The Vanquished Left: Eric Hobsbawm” (2002), in *idem*, *Spectrum: From Right to Left in the World of Ideas* (London, 2005), pp. 293–320, 293; Niall Ferguson, according to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eric_Hobsbawm (accessed 2 December 2012), p. 4. For Hobsbawm on the “generalised ignorance” of the profession see *The New Statesman*, 7 February 1975, according to Elliott, *Hobsbawm*, p. 87.

12. He frequently explained this much-discussed decision, for instance in his autobiography *Interesting Times*, pp. 217–218. See also Elliott, *Hobsbawm*, pp. 34–40.

media. His opinions received much attention; his voice was heard, and not only in Britain. He remained an active *homo politicus* and engaged in public controversies right up to his death. He maintained the core elements of his communist creed and his loyalty to some of the causes of the Russian October Revolution, even after becoming aware of all the repression and terror produced by the Bolshevik regime, particularly under Stalin.

I did not come into communism as a young Briton in England, but as a central European in the collapsing Weimar Republic. And I came into it when being a communist meant not simply fighting fascism but the world revolution. I still belong to the tail-end of the first generation of communists, the ones for whom the October Revolution was the central point of reference in the political universe.¹³

It is against the background of this deeply felt and never abandoned conviction that he perceived the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 mainly as a historical loss, and not as a step forward on the way to more democracy and freedom for many.

His scholarship and his political commitment were intrinsically intertwined. While his insights as a historian helped him to further develop, differentiate, and readjust his political orientation (within certain limits), his Marxist worldviews and theories influenced the questions he asked and the answers he gave in his scholarly work. At some points, his deeply held political creed acted as a constraint, causing some of the shortcomings of his historical analysis. But mostly it turned out to be a source of intellectual energy, analytical power, and synthetic virtuosity.

Without his political orientations and passions Hobsbawm would not have been the great historian he was. For comprehensive historical syntheses need a perspective. A sort of imagination, if not vision, about what the future will or should bring is a precondition for reconstructing the main lines of the past and relating them to the present, in the form of a “grand narrative” that resonates with its audience. This is where the political-ideological conviction of Hobsbawm as a Marxist and his extraordinary synthetic power as a historian intersected. Hobsbawm’s life and work testify to the immense intellectual productivity that Marxist worldviews and theories could have in the twentieth century if applied in an undogmatic and unorthodox way by an open-minded person with much curiosity and a broad humanistic education, and in an institutional setting which allowed and required open debate, permanent criticism, and continuous readjustment to new challenges and opportunities.

Hobsbawm did not produce a theory of history, but he was a highly reflective historian.¹⁴ He always criticized conventional “positivism” by

13. Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 217.

14. His major essays on the theory and methodology of history as a profession have been assembled in *On History*. The following quotations are taken from that volume, pp. 273, 275,

stressing the indispensable role of theories, viewpoints, and *fragestellungen* in selecting, reconstructing, and interpreting history. But, later on, he also criticized postmodern constructivism and insisted on the “centrality of the distinction between verifiable historical fact and fiction”. He was convinced, as most practitioners of our craft are, that professional historians, on the basis of their sources and loyal to their critical methods, can and indeed must make this distinction: “We have a responsibility to historical facts in general, and for criticizing the politico-ideological abuse of history in particular.”

Such abuse of history he observed in many quarters, in the 1990s particularly among the producers of nationalist myths and legends. To criticize and destruct such myths and legends was one of his motives when writing his book *Nations and Nationalism* as well as his influential volume (co-edited with Terence Ranger) *The Invention of Tradition*. “For history is the raw material for nationalist or ethnic or fundamentalist ideologies, as poppies are the raw material for heroin addiction. The past is an essential element, perhaps *the* essential element, in these ideologies. If there is no suitable past, it can always be invented.” He placed critique at the centre of what he stressed as being the public responsibility of historians.

But as a social historian and an activist on the left he had something to add:

Governments, the economy, schools, everything in society, is not for the benefit of privileged minorities. We can look after ourselves. It is for the benefit of the ordinary run of people, who are not particularly clever or interesting (unless, of course, we fall in love with one of them), not highly educated, not successful or destined for success – in fact, are nothing very special. It is for the people who, throughout history, have entered history outside their neighbourhoods as individuals only in the records of their births, marriages and deaths. Any society worth living in is one designed for them, not for the rich, the clever, the exceptional, although any society worth living in must provide room and scope for such minorities.

Eric Hobsbawm belonged to a very tiny minority of truly outstanding historians. But his hopes, his fears and his interpretations reached out and transcended the limits of his particularity. His work will be read for a long time to come.

Jürgen Kocka

Wissenschaftszentrum für Sozialforschung Berlin
Reichpietschufer 50, 10785 Berlin, Germany
E-mail: kocka@wzb.eu

276 and 279 (from lectures given in 1996 and 1993). See also Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, 1990); *idem* and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), esp. pp. 1–14 and 263–307.