Remembering

ERIC HOBSBAWM

By Wade Matthews[1]

Eric Hobsbawm died in London on October 1, 2012. He was among the leading historians of the twentieth-century. Indeed at the time of his death he was almost universally described as "arguably Britain's most respected historian," (Kettle and Wedderburn, 2012) and this despite his long-standing commitment to Marxism. It's not hard to see why. His productivity was extraordinary, stretching from the 1940s to the 2010s, and his intellectual range was immense, moving effortlessly from the Swing Riots and the Industrial Revolution to popular rebellion and global terrorism. In these terms, comparisons don't come easily to mind.

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Born in Alexandria in the year of the Russian Revolution, Hobsbawm grew up in Vienna, Berlin and London. Of Jewish descent (his mother was Austrian, his father British), his background was cosmopolitan, and he had family, at one time or another, spread over most of Western and Central Europe and Britain. After settling in London with his Uncle in 1933 following his parents' death, Hobsbawm studied history at King's College, Cambridge, at which time he became a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), though he'd been a teenage-communist in Berlin. His early years are wonderfully recounted in the first part of *Interesting Times*, his 2002 autobiography, described by Perry Anderson as among "the finest piece(s) of writing this famously accomplished stylist has ever produced" (Anderson 2005, p. 278).

Following an uneventful war, Hobsbawm received his first academic appointment in history at Birkbeck College, London in 1949, denied the post at Cambridge he coveted by an understated British McCarthyism. Hobsbawm was associated with Birkbeck for

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more than 50 years, and he taught occasionally at the New School for Social Research in New York in the 1980s and 1990s. After the war, he was a leading member of the Communist Party Historians' Group (founded in 1946), a group of influential Marxist historians who had a profound influence on historiographical developments from the 1950s onwards. Unlike many of his fellow Marxist historians (Christopher Hill, Rodney Hilton, John Saville, Dorothy and Edward Thompson, and Victor Kiernan) he stayed in the CPGB following the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, when the Historians' Group was basically dissolved. He remained a member of the CPGB up until the 1990s, though, paradoxically, he played a more influential role in debates within the Labour Party in the era of Benn and Kinnock.

Indeed it was partly due to his involvement in internal Labour disputes that Hobsbawm was transformed from academic historian to public intellectual during the 1980s. This owed as much to his political writings as it did to the international acclaim that increasingly greeted his historical work. In addition to a series of influential essays on Left politics in *Marxism Today* - later collected as *Politics for a Rational Left* - and *New Left Review*, he wrote extensively for *New Statesman*, the *Guardian*, and *London Review of Books*. In his final years he had become, somewhat improbably, a celebrity, feted not just in Blair's England but also in Lula's Brazil. "His name and work," as Gregory Elliott has commented, "are as familiar in Italy or Brazil, the USA or India, as they are in the UK" (Elliott 2010, p. x).

Whether as a reflection of this celebrity, or part cause of it, Hobsbawm's late writings were decidedly contemporary; this was perhaps even true of *How to Change the World*, a collection of his writings on Marx, which included new essays considering Marxism in light of the 2008 financial crisis. He greeted 'the new century' with a book-length conversation with Antonio Polito (published as *The New Century*) that discussed "problems as they appear today," (Hobsbawm 2000, p. 2) a sort of coda to *Age of Extremes*, his masterly interpretation of the 'short twentieth century'. *Globalisation, Democracy and Terrorism* followed in the mid-2000s. Incisive and pungent comment on the contemporary, these books were proof that age in no way diminished his capacities. To reinforce the point: three months before his death he handed his publishers a final manuscript titled *Fractured Spring*, described in the *Guardian* as an "exploration of culture and society in the 20th century" (Flood 2012).

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Hobsbawm's works will be familiar to many readers of this journal. Most will know him as the author of a magnificent four-volume history of modernity. The first volume - *The Age of Revolution* - was published in 1962, the last, perhaps Hobsbawm's most well known book, *Age of Extremes*, was published in 1994. Conceived in grand

nineteenth-century style, Hobsbawm's tetralogy arcs from the French and Industrial Revolutions of the eighteenth-century to the twentieth-century end of communism and rise of capitalist globalization. As a symphony of modernity, Hobsbawm's interpretation is orchestrated - broadly, and without theoretical loud hailing - by a Marxian inspired movement from economics through politics and society to the arts and ideas. Together, these volumes represent the implementation of what, in a famous 1971 programmatic essay, Hobsbawm called "the history of society" (Hobsbawm 1998). As an interpretation of the making of the modern world it is unlikely to be surpassed anytime soon.

Still, acute commentators have drawn attention to the significant break between the first three volumes - originally conceived as an interpretation of the 'long nineteenth century' - and the last. The first three volumes were structured by the "rise of the bourgeoisie"; *Age of Extremes* barely notes its existence. Even the working class - so important to *The Age of Capital* and *The Age of Empire* - is absent from Hobsbawm's account of 'the short twentieth century'. If the continued rise of global capitalism is a feature of the last volume, its ascent now takes place largely without the involvement of classes. Ideas, as well as extended discussion of the US and China, are missing from *Age of Extremes* too. Consideration of these matters now forms a growing literature on Hobsbawm's tetralogy, though even his most incisive critics maintain *Age of Extremes* standing as a 'masterpiece'.

Others will associate Hobsbawm with the mid-twentieth-century rise of social history. He was among those early 'historical modernizers' who moved the discipline away from a narrative history of elites to a 'total history' informed by the social sciences. It is now customary, perhaps even obligatory, for historians to draw on insights from anthropology, demography, economics, and sociology. As one measure of Hobsbawm's merits, this melding of history and the social sciences was already a feature of his early works in the 1950s and 1960s, including *Primitive Rebels*, *Labouring Men*, *Bandits*, *Industry and Empire*, and *Captain Swing*, the last co-authored with George Rudé. If it was a good time to be a social historian, perhaps even a Marxist social historian, by the early 1970s, then Hobsbawm had done much to make it so.

But we should be careful to distinguish Hobsbawm's from other currents of social history. Despite the tenor of *Primitive Rebels*, and some of the essays in *Labouring Men* such as 'The Tramping Artisan' (arguably his finest historical essay), Hobsbawm eschewed much of the 'people's history' or 'history from below' perhaps best associated with the History Workshop movement. His contributions to social and labour history were untiringly unsentimental. This is not to say that he didn't portray the peasant or common labourer of the past with sympathy and imagination, as evidenced by his intervention in 'the standard of living debate' and his sometime-vituperative dismissal of those historians who purveyed an optimistic view of the Industrial Revolution. Still, he could be concisely contemptuous of a people's history that strayed too far from his own

conception of history as a discipline: "The problem about this kind of history…is that it sacrifices analysis and explanation to celebration and identification. It encourages a vogue for antiquarianism…and for a dislike of generalization which in itself is no more satisfactory in red versions than in true-blue ones" (Hobsbawm 1981).

This judgment gives a clue to some of the defining features of Hobsbawm's histories. He favoured the broad overview and generalization over what Christopher Hill once called "the worm's eye view" (Hill 1972, p. 14). As suited this preference, his tone was most often Olympian and detached, even if his prose was interspersed with firm likes and dislikes. The basic historical problem for Hobsbawm was explanation of how humanity had moved from the stone age to the nuclear age. From such a perspective, worms were of little consequence. "We all know," he once wrote, "that the history of railways begins when it is taken out of the hands of train-spotters and historic demography when it emancipates itself from the genealogists" (Hobsbawm 1981).

Hobsbawm also made a series of influential contributions - at once historical and theoretical - to nationalism studies. Both his essays in *The Invention of Tradition* - a book co-edited with Terence Ranger - and *Nation and Nationalism since 1780* are now standard texts of the subject - texts that defend a version of the 'modernist' view of the nation-state and nationalism's origins. No less influential were his contributions to an understanding of his own discipline, many of which were collected in 1997 in *On History*. It was no accident that this volume appeared when postmodernism was affecting its strongest influence on young - and not so young - historical minds. He also wrote a fabulous short book on the historiography of the French Revolution, *Echoes of the Marseillaise*, published shortly after the Revolution's bi-centenary - a book that defended the 'social interpretation' of the Revolution against a growing army of historical revisionists. Sometimes disdainful of the history of ideas, he nonetheless produced a work (in his 93rd year!) on the intellectual history of Marxism that built on an earlier collection of essays, *Revolutionaries*. There will be few who have recently come to Marx who won't have come to him through the works of Eric Hobsbawm.

Indeed most will recognize, and remember, Hobsbawm as a *Marxist* historian, and it was this association, ironically, which partly lay behind the fame of his later years (the 'last Marxist' as he was dubbed by the British press). In a late essay he wrote that most historians who became Marxists "did so because they wanted to change the world in association with the labour and socialist movements which, largely under Marxist inspiration, became mass political forces" (Hobsbawm 2007, p. 180). This was certainly true of Hobsbawm. Initially attracted to literature, a product of his late schooling in England, Hobsbawm became a historian because he was a Marxist. He always considered Marx to be primarily a historical writer, if not a historian, rather than an economist or a sociologist, and he would have agreed with Michel Foucault, if about little else, that in order to be a historian one had in some way to be a Marxist.

There was something decidedly unfashionable about Hobsbawm's Marxism though. He always counted Marx's '1859 Preface' - complete with its sketch of "the general shape of human historical development from primitive communalism to capitalism" - the core of any properly 'materialist conception of history,' though he was careful to designate it a 'guide to history' rather than history itself (Hobsbawm 1984, p. 41). It reinforced, in nonetheless "pregnant form," (Hobsbawm 1964, p. 10) that the mode of production was the fundamental basis of any interpretation of historical development. The '1859 Preface' was also the source of a conception of history as directional - and progressive in the long run - which Hobsbawm insisted was integral to a Marxist interpretation of the past. He wondered once whether it was possible to repudiate the '1859 Preface', as he no doubt believed many other Marxist historians had effectively done, and remain a Marxist (Hobsbawm 1984).

It will take some time to get the proper measure of Hobsbawm's achievement as a historian. The magnificence of his works is unlikely to be challenged, even though he will continue to be summarily dismissed by an inveterate few on account of his political commitments. Yet, if we turn to compare him with his own generation of Marxist historians, some interesting differences arise. He never dominated a century in quite the same way that Christopher Hill did England's seventeenth-century. He never founded a school of international historiography as E.P. Thompson did. Not even his four-volume history of modernity could match *The Making of the English Working Class* in terms of influence exerted on other historians. Nor will he be associated with a particular subject like Dorothy Thompson is with British Chartism, Rodney Hilton with the English middle ages, David Montgomery with Gilded and Progressive Age American labour history, or Albert Soboul with the French Revolution. In some sense, his influence will be felt at a distance, and this because he wrote, particularly after the 1960s, mainly synthetic histories.

Such comparisons are not meant to diminish Hobsbawm's achievement but to point to where that achievement lay. What is remarkable about Hobsbawm's oeuvre - and certainly unmatched by those historians mentioned above (the only one of his cohort which might merit mention here is Victor Kiernan) - was its range. He made an important contribution to multiple fields and historiographies. His first book on 'archaic' social movements virtually established the field. Out of his membership of the Communist Party Historians' Group he launched important interventions into debates over the transition to capitalism, the crisis of the seventeenth-century, and the social effects of the Industrial Revolution which are still referred to. His interpretation of twentieth century history - to say nothing of his account of the 'long nineteenth-century' - has formed and will form the touchstone for all other interpretations. No student of nations and nationalism can avoid his reflections on the origin of national identity and the nation-state. Even his autobiography will constitute a reference point for historians setting out to relate the personal to the public and the political. Historians of the Left in

the twentieth-century will use his numerous political writings as both primary and secondary source. Whatever he wrote, others had and will have to take account.

If this is not enough, there is the written product of his enduring musical passion to consider. From the mid-1950s, Hobsbawm became the Jazz critic for the *New Statesmen* under the name Francis Newton, borrowed from the communist Jazz trumpeter on Billie Holiday's 'Strange Fruit'. He wrote weekly on Jazz for the next decade or so, and a book, *The Jazz Scene*, appeared in 1959 (a revised edition appeared 30 years later). Later writings on the subject appeared in *Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion and Jazz*, published in 1998. First attracted to the form as a teenager, he considered Jazz the "music of protest and rebellion," a "people's music" that had "rescued the qualities of folk-music in a world… designed to extirpate them; and…so far maintained them against the dual blandishments of pop music and art-music" (Elliott 2012, p. 44). A friend, a well-known Canadian historian who holds Hobsbawm's histories in the highest regard, once commented that among Hobsbawm's oeuvre it was his obituary of Billie Holiday that he treasured most. It ends this way:

> To be born with both beauty and self-respect in the Negro ghetto of Baltimore in 1915 was too much of a handicap, even without rape at the age of ten and drug-addiction in her teens. But while she destroyed herself, she sang, unmelodious, profound and heartbreaking. It is impossible not to weep for her, or not to hate the world which made her what she was (Hobsbawm 1959, p. 71).

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Hobsbawm once wrote that not only was "it wrong to assume that workers have no country" (Hobsbawm 1988, p. 58) it was also wrong to assume that they only have one and that we know what it is. It would also be wrong to suggest that Hobsbawm had no country, despite his cosmopolitan background and his association with a discipline he once described as necessarily a-national and allergic to 'identity'. But if Hobsbawm did have a country we should nonetheless be careful about identifying what it is. Indeed, it is difficult to get a fix on where Hobsbawm positioned himself - and was involuntarily positioned - in order to write anything at all. But an understanding of that positioning will be essential to any accounting of Hobsbawm. He would have been the first to admit that social being has an important influence - broadly understood - on social consciousness.

Hobsbawm's Jewishness was not unimportant to his intellectual and political development, even though, as an Enlightenment rationalist, he dismissed religion as

myth. Indeed, he once described his Marxism as an effect of his 'ethnicity'. "As Jews," in early 1930s Germany he suggested,

> we were precluded by definition from supporting parties based on confessional allegiance, or on a nationalism which excluded Jews…We became either communists or some equivalent form of revolutionary marxists (sic), or if we chose our own version of blood-and-soil nationalism, Zionists. But even the great bulk of young intellectual Zionists saw themselves as some sort of revolutionary marxist (sic) nationalists. There was virtually no other choice…We simply chose *a* future rather than no future, which meant revolution…a new world rather than no world. The great October Revolution and Soviet Russia proved to us that such a new world was possible… (Hobsbawm 1973, p. 62).

In this sense, communism, for Hobsbawm, was a matter of survival rather than an "opiate of the intellectuals" in Raymond Aron's acerbic phrase.

Jewishness was also arguably one source of Hobsbawm's consistently tragic vision of the past, and the caution, increasingly evident after the 1950s, that characterized his statements on the present and future. He repeatedly reminded readers that the alternative version of Marx's 'end of history' was 'mutual ruin'. He rarely harboured illusions about socialism's prospects. He had an ear for crises and ends and forward march's halted. Jewishness, rather than a residual Britishness, might also help to explain why he was so concerned to defend the territorial integrity of Britain against those, like Tom Nairn, who would argue for its 'break-up' in the 1970s. The Austro-Hungarian Empire was a safer place for Jews than the ethnically-based nation-states which replaced it.

But, as Donald Sassoon has remarked, being Jewish for Hobsbawm "meant cosmopolitanism and anti-nationalism" (Pfeffer 2012). Hobsbawm was perhaps an exemplary of Isaac Deutscher's 'non-Jewish Jew' - an identity which fitted his vision of the historian, a "migrant bird, at home in arctic and tropic, overflying half the globe" (Hobsbawm 2002, p. 415). His identity as a non-Jewish Jew helps account for his attitude to Israel. As he explained in *Interesting Times*: "I have no emotional attachment to the practices of an ancestral religion and even less to the small, militarist, culturally disappointing and politically aggressive nation-state which asks for my solidarity on racial grounds" (Hobsbawm 2002, p. 24). Confirmation of this view came in 2007 when, as a Jew, he founded alongside other influential British Jews, Independent Jewish Voices, an organization designed to take back some part of Jewishness from a Jewish establishment which uncritically supported Israel.

Hobsbawm was undoubtedly cosmopolitan, an effect equally of the involuntary geographical mobility of his early years, his Jewishness, and his commitment to world

revolution. However it is not true to say, as Sassoon does, that Hobsbawm "hated any kind of nationalism" (Pfeffer 2012). World revolution might have been the original 'homeland' of Hobsbawm's political formation in Berlin in 1932, but circumstances not long after impressed upon him the strategic value of the Popular Front. Indeed, the *raison d'être* associated with the Popular Front would continually direct his political thinking after 1945, something evident in his contribution to debates within the Labour Party in the 1980s. It also explains the warmth he felt for 'citizen nationalism', particularly in the era of Tudjman and Milosevic, and why he recommended that the Left steal back national flags from the forces of reaction, as he did in relation to the Falklands War.

There is also the matter of Hobsbawm's relationship to Britain, the country he lived in, but perhaps did not quite call home, for almost 80 years. He never hid his affection for other places - France, Italy, Spain, Latin America - an affection demonstrated in *Interesting Times*. Absent from his autobiography, however, was any reflection on his relationship to Britain. Because of his father he was known as '*Der Englander*' in his German school-days, and later at Cambridge, according to one contemporary, he affected "a large and vulgar patriotism for England, which he considered in weak moments as his spiritual home" (Keunemann 1982, p. 366). An early love of nature and literature might provide one explanation for this. Early on he was primarily, though never exclusively of course, a British historian. In addition to a PhD on the Fabians (never published) he wrote extensively on British labour and social history in the 1950s and 1960s. He admitted affection for the British working-class, which he first encountered while a member of a sapper regiment in the British Army during the war. There were, too, the ambiguities associated with his conception of 'socialist patriotism', a patriotism which always had Britain as its object.

If there are ambiguities surrounding his relationship to Britain, there was no ambiguity about his relationship to major metropolitan centers. Hobsbawm was a thoroughly metropolitan thinker. Indeed, he never hid his preference for the city over the country. "I am a megalopolitan who has never lived in a city of less than a million…I really have no organic connection with the country as a place where they produce things, or for that matter with rural pastoral. I can't even say that I go overboard for literary graves" (Miller 2012). His preference for cities is no doubt reflected in his interpretation of nationalism and his consistent dislike of separatist nationalisms which, as Tom Nairn has suggested, always had rural roots.

Whatever the residual effects of his Jewishness and his Britishness on his intellectual output, his primary homeland was socialist internationalism - variously, world revolution, Popular-Front communism, and the Soviet Union. It was his more obvious allegiance to communism, particularly after 1956, that has invited most subsequent comment. Hobsbawm has often felt the need to defend this allegiance. In

Interesting Times he explained that, given his political formation in the shadow of Weimar Germany's collapse, it was simply more difficult for him to leave. He remained in the CPGB, he said elsewhere, "out of loyalty to a great cause and to all those who had sacrificed their lives for it" (Hobsbawm 2000, p. 159).

Why Hobsbawm remained in the CPGB after 1956 is an interesting question - and one that has been explored *ad infinitum* - but what affect this had on his historical work is more vexed. Three affects might be briefly mentioned. First, there was his uncritical reverence for the Popular Front, a reverence which affected not just his understanding of socialist strategy but also his understanding of the course of twentieth-century history. This was certainly the case in *Age of Extremes*. But his decision to remain in the CPGB also prevented the kind of accounting with historical Stalinism that was a feature of other Marxist historians' work such as E.P. Thompson and John Saville. This lack affected, most obviously, his understanding of twentieth-century communism. Finally, it might be noted that his communist allegiance consistently precipitated unnecessarily, and sometimes erroneous, negative and ungenerous judgments on other movements of the Left, whether the socialist humanism of Britain's New Left, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, or the student radicalism of the 1960s.

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Hobsbawm was among the most influential historians of the twentieth century, and he was certainly unique in that his influence crossed oceans and continents (his work has been translated into around forty languages). He was among the few historians to exert a political influence (and once again not in just one country), and among an even smaller few to have exerted this influence from the Left. For those on the Left, and I suspect for others beside, his voice will be missed.

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