IN MEMORIAM

ERIC HOBSBAWM (1917-2012): HOW TO CHANGE THE WORLD

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1 October 2012 saw the demise of one of our greatest and most respected living historians. The death of Eric Hobsbawm gave rise to the expression of clashing accounts of a weighty but also controversial scholarly output. Not only his life’s work, but his person and politics were brought under the sweltering scrutiny of the British academic, political and media worlds. Having long established his reputation in Britain as a prolific and incisive Marxist historian, by the time he celebrated the age of 95, Eric Hobsbawm commanded arguably unrivalled international renown for his profound, spirited and wide-ranging analyses spanning four centuries.¹

Born in Alexandria in 1917, the son of a second-generation British father and an Austrian mother, Eric Hobsbawm’s childhood was marked by the Vienna of the 1920s and the rise of Hitler in

¹ Whilst Hobsbawm considered himself to the last a historian of the nineteenth century primarily, his research and writings extended from the eighteenth to the twentieth century; and as a historian of our own times, the inception of the twenty-first as well.
Germany.⁵ These experiences, he would contend sixty years later in his 1993 Creighton lecture,³ determined his politics and his interest in history. It was, however, his time at King’s College, Cambridge that confirmed both. Having read Marx and become politicised in the Berlin of his teens, Hobsbawm never faltered in his belief in Marxism’s endurance as a viable critique of capitalism. His unswerving commitment to the communist party, of which he remained a member almost up to the date of its dissolution, and his continued faithfulness to an ideology professed to have been discredited in the West, often invited censure from his critics; yet whether Hobsbawm’s academic success had been aided or hindered by his politics remains an open question.

After the end of the Second World War, Hobsbawm returned to Cambridge to complete his doctorate. It was his research on the Fabians during that time that must have influenced his particular fondness for the nineteenth century. Yet the choice of the nineteenth century over the twentieth had been in part dictated by the young scholar’s political commitments, as he would later acknowledge: ‘I could see that what was coming out of the Soviet Communist Party in terms of contemporary history was not acceptable. Thus I didn’t want to be involved in debates that would either have taken me over onto the other side, or have brought me into conflict with my conscience as an academic’.⁴

Hobsbawm became a lecturer at Birkbeck College, University of London in 1947 and the following year published his first book based on research on the Fabians, Labour’s Turning Point. Four years later he co-founded the British historical academic journal that quickly became one of the foremost forces in the development of social history: Past & Present. His first major work – Primitive Rebels

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² For a detailed account see the historian’s autobiography: Hobsbawm 2002.
³ Hobsbawm 1993.
⁴ Hobsbawm 2000. p. 159.
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(1959) – constituted an original account of ‘primitive’ or ‘archaic’ forms of social agitation, such as Robin Hood-style banditry and rural secret societies as early labour and revolutionary organisations.

In 1962 the first volume of what would become ‘The Age of’ tetralogy, *The Age of Revolution: 1789–1848* was produced. Split between ‘developments’ and ‘results’, the volume began with an account of the historical context – the crisis of ancient regimes – against which the dual revolution was to take place. Hobsbawm interpreted the transformation of the world from 1789 to 1848 as stemming from the French political revolution and the British industrial one. Adopting an unapologetically European, Franco-British perspective, he contended that what the world had witnessed was not the triumph of industry, but rather of capitalist industry, and instead of liberty and equality it was middle class or bourgeois liberal society that came to be victorious in the age of revolution.

Perhaps it was this desire to understand the lacunae of working class revolutionary strategy, in contrast to the middle class successes, in shaping the fate of contemporary society and its modern economic reality that had resulted in his continued interest in the study of labour organisations and movements as testified by *Worlds of Labour* (1984), anticipated two decades earlier by the first collection of Hobsbawm’s most significant analytical essays on the history of labour: *Labouring Men*, published in 1964.5 An example of Hobsbawm at his best, the volume showcases the historian’s mastery of his sources as he opened a cogent debate of the economic and technical conditions that determined the success or failure of labour movements, which he distinguished from the working classes as such.

5 Other collections of essays by Eric Hobsbawm, include *On History* (1997) and *Uncommon People* (1998).
Further development to Hobsbawm’s analysis of industry and revolution came in 1968 with the publication of what was for a time one of his most widely held works on the British Empire and the industrial revolution, *Industry and Empire*. Britain’s decline and her role in the world economy is the key theme of this book, Hobsbawm explained. Nearly half a century later, given the present socio-economic and political context, the insights offered by this work of incredible breadth and synthesis are as relevant as ever.

The enduring popularity and influence of Hobsbawm’s *Industry and Empire* has only been surpassed by his ‘The Age of’ series, originally planned as a trilogy comprising *The Age of Revolution*, *The Age of Capital* and *The Age of Empire*. Like its forerunner in the series, *The Age of Capital* was thematically divided between ‘developments’ and ‘results’; with a ‘Revolutionary Prelude’ anticipating and setting the scene for the two. The volume intended, in Hobsbawm’s own words ‘to “make sense” of the third quarter of the nineteenth century’ when the word ‘capitalism’ had for the first time entered our political and economic vocabularies.6 *The Age of Empire* completed Hobsbawm’s synthesis and interpretation of ‘the century which transformed the world… more strikingly, inasmuch as revolutionary and continuous transformation was then new’.7

The final volume in ‘The Age of’ series, *The Age of Extremes* was an unexpected, yet remarkable addition. Having systematically unearthed the constitutive blocks of the ‘long nineteenth century’, Hobsbawm turned to explaining the breakdown in the century that followed of the civilisation it had birthed; a civilisation of the capitalist economy, of the liberal constitutional structure and bourgeois in its hegemonic image. More speculative in nature, and focusing on the question of why things had turned out the way they

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6 Hobsbawm 1975, p. 10.
7 Hobsbawm 1987, p. 338.
had, it finalised the series in 1994 and demanded the author’s expertise to stretch much further than his previous works had permitted.

Nonetheless, *The Age of Extremes* was not altogether unique in Hobsbawm’s body of work in addressing a contemporary problematic. The publication in 1990 of *Nations and Nationalisms Since 1780* had already aptly demonstrated that the historian’s grasp of the core issues facing Europe in the twentieth century was quite as sound as that of the nineteenth. Concise and proficient, it provided a topical and necessary introduction to the interpretation of nations and nationalisms as modern inventions, at a time when emerging nations throughout Eastern Europe sought to reinvent themselves and their respective national narratives after the fall of the USSR. With the thought-provoking collection of essays entitled *Globalization, Democracy and Terrorism* (2007) Hobsbawm extended beyond an analysis of nations and nationalism in his attempt to make sense of the world we live in. Rather pessimistic in tone, the collection brought under scrutiny, in a characteristically engaging and incisive manner, such key issues as the effects of globalisation, the plights of democracy (specifically liberal democracy) and the threat of terrorism.

Last year, 2011, marked the publication of what was to be the seemingly inexhaustible historian’s final book: *How to Change the World: Tales of Marx and Marxism*. This volume brought together a number of Hobsbawm’s writings on Marx and Marxism, most of which had not been previously published in English. These were the product of fifty years’ labour – from 1956 to 2009 – on ‘the interaction of historical context and the development and influence of ideas’.\(^8\) This volume representa a considered study of the influence that Marx’s ideas wielded in the twentieth century; and the argument of the book begins and ends in a symmetry of intent:

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\(^8\) Hobsbawm 2011, p. viii.
an assessment of the philosopher’s relevance for the new age and its new crises. In view of his life-long commitment to Marxism, it is a fitting final contribution to its annals.

To the last Eric Hobsbawm believed that humanity cannot function without great hopes and absolute passions.\(^9\) It was with great hope and absolute passion that he had begun his political journey in 1932. Throughout his career, the historian’s works were infused with that same hope and passion, and as a result he enjoyed, particularly in his later years, widespread reputation and esteem. And yet, he always refused to abjure his past and remained true to his convictions. In this he may have been right to claim having ‘not only the interest of scarcity, but of incomprehensibility’,\(^{10}\) Whereas his politics may have remained to many incomprehensible, his academic prowess and lucidity have surely safeguarded his place amongst the greats of our time.

**Works Cited**


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\(^9\) Hobsbawm, 2000, pp. 159-61.

\(^{10}\) Hobsbawm 2002, p. xi.
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