

'He knew everything'

Eric Hobsbawm, 1917–2012

Eric Hobsbawm often told the story of his life, saying that it offered an interesting point of view for the historian he became. He was born in 1917 in Alexandria, in an Egypt then a British protectorate, to Jewish parents. His paternal grandfather was a Polish cabinetmaker who had emigrated to Britain in the 1870s. His father Leopold Percy Hobsbaum (changed to Hobsbawm through the error of a consular official), an unsuccessful tradesman in the East End of London, had joined his brother Sydney in Egypt. There, in 1913, he met Nelly Grün, a young middle-class Austrian, who had arrived in the country on a prize scholarship. The couple, scions of two empires at war with one another, married in 1916 in neutral Switzerland and returned to Alexandria, where Eric was born, before leaving for Vienna in 1919. Leopold died in 1929 of a heart attack, and Nelly in 1931 from tuberculosis. The young Eric, who was just 14, was brought up by his uncle, who lived in Berlin. Eric Hobsbawm joined the German Communist Party (KPD), slipping tracts under doors during the weeks before Hitler came to power. He was sent with his brothers and sisters to London to live with the British branch of the family.

A pupil at Marylebone Grammar School, Hobsbawm gained a scholarship to study history at King's College, Cambridge. Now a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, he was associated at Cambridge with a generation of Stalinist intellectuals, among whom were the future notorious spies, the 'Cambridge Four'. He studied history and came to the attention of Michael Postan, who directed the *Economic History Review* during a period when history was still confined to politics and the nation. He then spent seven years (1939–46) serving in a defence unit in East Anglia. He used to say that this experience 'converted' him to the British working class. He wrote a thesis at Cambridge on the Fabians (1947) but did not get the post to which his abilities seemed to entitle him. In 1947 he was appointed as a lecturer at Birkbeck College, which specialized in courses for adults. Hobsbawm used to say that he did his research during the day and taught at night. He became professor there in 1970 and taught at the college until his retirement in 1982. He also became a Londoner, living in Hampstead with his second wife Marlene, whom he married in 1962.

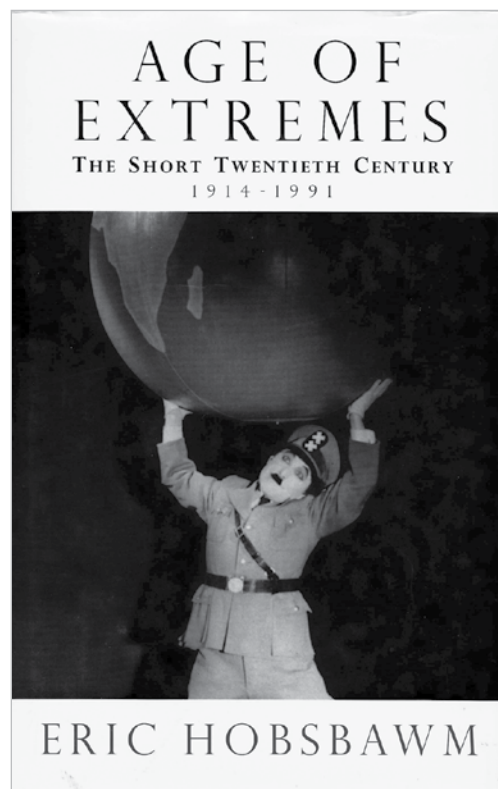
Towards the end of the 1940s, Hobsbawm was part of the Communist Party Historians' Group, along with Christopher Hill, Rodney Hilton, E.P. Thompson, George Rudé, John Saville, Victor Kiernan and Leslie Morton. In 1952, this group founded the journal *Past and Present*, subtitled *A Journal of Scientific History* until 1958, when it opened up to non-Marxists like Moses Finley and Lawrence Stone. Inspired by the French Annales School, with which it shared an interest in studies of the *longue durée*, *Past and Present* engaged with social and economic history and with international history – even if England remained the privileged terrain. Hobsbawm was associated with the journal throughout his life, and always considered history as a sort of science, being opposed to the 'linguistic turn' of the 1980s.

Hobsbawm's books were marked by an empathy with the oppressed and with history from below, which he maintained throughout his life. One of his first articles, which appeared in *Past and Present* in 1952, was devoted to machine breakers. One of his first books, *Primitive Rebels* (1959), looked at rural secret societies in the modern

period – the ones Hobsbawm called ‘social bandits’ – which preceded the organized forms of social movement: he continued this work in *Bandits* (1969). *Labour’s Turning Point* (a collection of sources that appeared in 1948), *Labouring Men* (1964) and *Worlds of Labour* (1984) dealt with different aspects of the British working class, with a particular focus on the period 1880–1920, when, he wrote, the working class was reinvented around the new unionism, co-operatives, socialism and the Labour Party, but also around the cloth cap, football, the cinema and fish and chips. *Captain Swing* (1969), a systematic study that he carried out with George Rudé, was for a long time the only monograph on the rural riots of Southern England in 1830.

Hobsbawm’s preferred field was social and economic history, and his name is closely linked with its golden age in Britain from 1960 to 1980. One of his major works in this area was *Industry and Empire* (1968), an economic history of Britain from 1750, which integrated into one and the same movement the First Industrial Revolution and the constitution of the larger empire. He was one of the protagonists in the famous ‘standards of living’ debate about wage levels during industrialization, criticizing those who could only see progress in the condition of the workers. ‘It is a good time to be a social historian’ he wrote in 1971, when social history had won its place in the university, with its networks, its colloquia and its journals, and had somehow made political history look old hat. One of his most original contributions was on the ‘tramping artisans’ of industrialization, navvies, boilermakers and other mechanics of European industrialization, in *Labouring Men*. Hobsbawm barely engaged in micro-history or in biography. In compensation, he was a historian of the social in all its dimensions, save women’s history, pretty much absent in his work. Before cultural history had acquired the place that it has nowadays, Hobsbawm was interested in cultural practices, in games and sports, in leisure pursuits and music. Under the pseudonym Francis Newton, he published numerous articles on jazz, another of his passions, and wrote two books on the subject, *The Jazz Scene* (1959) and *Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion and Jazz* (1998). Above all, he integrated culture into all of his works, notably in his grand syntheses, where he always devoted chapters to the arts and sciences, religion and currents of thought. In the words of Tony Judt, ‘he knew everything’.

It was Hobsbawm’s tetralogy that earned him his international reputation. *The Age of Revolution: 1789–1848* (1962), *The Age of Capital: 1848–1875* (1975), *The Age of Empire: 1875–1914* (1987) and *The Age of Extremes: 1914–1991* (1994) became required reading in British universities, and then, in dozens of translations, throughout the world. Works of global history in a period when the essential forms of historical production took as their frame the structures of the nation, these four volumes are characterized by qualities that lead to consensus: an exceptional sense of synthesis; a pronounced taste for comparative history; an acute sense of the quantitative; and at the same time a gift for the relevant anecdote. The series was first conceived as a trilogy about the period from the ‘two revolutions’ (French and Industrial) to the First World War. Even though he had written on both the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, Hobsbawm used to say that ‘his’ century was the ‘long nineteenth century’, as he called it, in an expression that enjoyed great success. Even the first volume, *The Age of Revolution*, remains, fifty years after its appearance, one of the best introductions to



the period. *The Age of Extremes* came afterwards, and no doubt this last volume, much more than the previous ones, bears the trace of Hobsbawm's political bad habits, in relation to a period when he was as much an engaged witness as a historian. The tetralogy was founded on a vast bibliography that only a polyglot like him could master, given that he spoke not only English and German, but also French, Italian and Spanish, and read Portuguese and Catalan. Hobsbawm's style, devoid of all jargon, impressed with its precision and clarity. These four volumes made Hobsbawm into perhaps the best-known historian in the world. One sees his mastery of world history in a book that reflects on the construction of national identity, *Nation and Nationalism since 1780* (1991), a question that he had also addressed in a book co-edited with Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), whose thesis continues to be deployed. Hobsbawm was a true 'cosmopolitan', engaging in debate all over the world, from the United States to India, China to Latin America (particularly Brazil). He was also criticized, as was proper. For example, whilst Hobsbawm was well studied in India, Ranajit Guha criticized him for having underestimated the political character of peasant struggles. Edward Said judged his tetralogy to be too centred on Europe and the Western world.

Above all, it was Hobsbawm's 'communist' profession of faith that earned him serious hostility. Among conservatives, first of all: after his death, in an obituary that had more than a whiff of the Cold War, the historian A.N. Wilson accused him of being a 'liar' whose books would not be read in the future, of 'hating Great Britain', even of being a 'traitor' (*Daily Mail*, 2 October 2012). But criticism also came from intellectuals of the social-democratic Left, such as Tony Judt. Hobsbawm followed all the zigzags of Stalinism. Unlike numerous British intellectuals (E.P. Thompson, Christopher Hill and Raphael Samuel) he did not leave the Communist Party, neither in 1956, after the crushing of the Hungarian Revolution by the Soviet army, nor later. If he made criticisms of Stalinism they were always somehow benevolent ones. He no longer engaged in militant activity, but, unlike French intellectuals such as François Furet or Annie Kriegel, he never repented his communism. Even when he admitted being mistaken about Stalinism, he did not renounce Marxism, to which he held right to the end. 'I belong to the generation for whom the October Revolution represented the hope of the world', he wrote in *Interesting Times*. He often explained that his attachment to communism was a loyalty to the engagement of his youth, in the last months of the Weimar Republic. At the same time, from the beginning of the 1970s onwards, he enjoined the Labour Party to change in order to adapt to the sociological evolution of the electorate (the supposed decline of the working class), to directly appeal to the middle class, clashing with the Left of the Labour Party ('The Forward March of Labour Halted', *Marxism Today*, 1978). Hobsbawm took up the posture of a rather moderate 'left intellectual' (*Politics for a Rational Left: Political Writings, 1977–1988*, 1989). His Marxism was a method for analysing the past and the present, rather than a tool for changing the world. Prized by Neil Kinnock, who said of him that he was his 'favourite Marxist', Hobsbawm was made a Companion of Honour by Tony Blair's government in 1998. He had gained not just great notoriety but also a certain respectability at the heart of the British, not to say European, intelligentsia. After his death, even the neo-conservative historian Niall Ferguson praised him, in the name of their friendship and shared interest in economic history.

It is always difficult to predict what will remain of an author's work. Hobsbawm founded no school, and in the end had no disciples properly speaking. Like every historical œuvre, his is destined to be overtaken. But many of his books are so various in their objects, so rich in erudition and at times so generous in their interest in the forgotten people of history, that it's a good bet that our age has not done with reading the historian who is indissociable from the 'short twentieth century'.

Fabrice Bensimon