

Eric Hobsbawm, A short guide to reading

While the name Eric Hobsbawm will be known to many, his writing may be less familiar. The following is intended not as a survey, that will be carried out by people in far longer treatments than this, but as a very brief guide. Only a few salient books are referred to, and these nearly all historical, since it is to the historian that recent tributes have paid most attention. As to the man, the surest means of insight is his autobiography, *Interesting Times*. Published in 2002, it stretches most of his life, though the years since saw a remarkable vitality, with works on contemporary global politics. Very briefly, he was born in Alexandria in June 1917. Of a Jewish family, he grew up in Vienna and between, 1931 and 1933, Berlin. He experienced at a young age the rise of Nazism against which he played an active part. Though he studied at Cambridge and saw war service, his adult life was based in London, where he taught at a very special place for him and many others, Birkbeck. A global figure, he toured the continents, notably South America, lecturing and meeting with key actors of his century. As a historian he is among the greats, as a human being, he continues to mean much more.

His output of writing is vast, and the intent here is to no more than point toward a few books from which readers may select as a means of getting to know Eric Hobsbawm the writer a little better. The first thing that has to be stressed about Eric Hobsbawm is that he is readable. That may sound a silly thing to say, but in a world full of dry as dust academic textbooks, that is an achievement of considerable merit. By readable I mean his style addresses a person with average or better reading ability, and a capacity to want to learn. Hobsbawm's own explanation of this all too rare ability to communicate well as a writer, is the training he received at Birkbeck, where the usually more mature student learns in the evening and expects to receive teaching that is engaging and instructive. The many tributes paid not just now, but over many years; demonstrate that Eric Hobsbawm was these and much more.

Arbitrary of course, but for ease, we can group his work under five headings: social history, nations and nationalism, historiography, politics and periodic. In addition, was a separate sphere of life and writing that of a jazz critic. Part written under the name Francis Newton, this seemingly distinct part of life has confused many, and no doubt, there remain those on one side of the divide who are unaware that the other exists. Periodic is a bad heading admittedly, but includes the possible best known work; *The Age of Revolution 1789-1848*, *Age of Capital 1848-1875*, *Age of Empire 1875-1914* and *The Age of Extremes 1914-1991*. The titles are a guide to their themes, but the range of contents mean that together the four works provide a modern history, and one far better than either the utilitarian text book or the superficial 'coffee table' volume with endless glossy pictures.

Hobsbawm's social history includes some of his earliest writing and perhaps encapsulates better than any other what he his most admired for. If a political historian is often concerned with the 1%, the rulers, a social historian is concerned with the 99%, the ruled. In launching *Past and Present* in 1952, Hobsbawm together with Christopher Hill, Rodney Hilton and others of what was an extra-ordinary generation of historians and writers, made history. With the *Annales* as their reference point, these iconoclasts established a journal that began to turn history upside down. 'History from the bottom up' as it became fashionably known when the History Workshop was launched, was a viewpoint that saw the past from how it had been experienced by the vast majority. *Past and Present's*

innovation however had been much more, bringing analysis to history and so moving beyond narrative description to reasoning and questions of 'why'. It placed problem of causation firmly on the historical table.

Eric Hobsbawm's social history can be most easily found in two earlier collections of essays, *Labouring Men* and *Worlds of Labour*. The breadth of these essays is enthralling; political shoemakers, Tom Paine, Methodists and unionists from many trades. Later additions have been guerrilla soldiers from Vietnam, students from 1968 and peasants from many parts. These characters may be found in a newer collection, *Uncommon People*, a particularly good example of Hobsbawm's capacity to move effortlessly from one place and time to another, and from particular to general as the common features of experience between people as discerned.

However, the most popular introduction to Eric Hobsbawm the social historian is probably *Industry and Empire*. This oft-reprinted book examines Britain from 1750 to the mid C20, from the perspective of social economics. In other words, economics with real people, communities and ways of life. It is lucid, informative and as relevant an introduction, though it is more than that, as when first published. An updated edition appeared in 1999 with a new Preface and an additional chapter by Chris Wrigley. It must remain one of Hobsbawm's most appealing books, written to address a general reader while meeting the needs of the formal student.

Eric Hobsbawm, the social historian remained allied to the cause of *Past and Present* and the need to analyse and not merely describe. His and the journal's influence have been global, though nowhere more so than in Wales, with *Llafur*, originally the *Journal of Welsh Labour History* and the South Wales Coalfield History Project. Perhaps the mark of genius in his work was to capture the essence of a subject and make understandable the meaning for other places and times. His political shoemakers might be found across towns and villages in Asia, Latin America and beyond, what is required is self-recognition and insight into how figures located at one point in history, can be realised in quite other contexts.

Eric Hobsbawm's political writing, contrary to some childish name-calling, yearns toward the broad left attempted in the antifascism of the 1930s. Demonstration of this is a collection of writings, *Politics for a Rational Left* and in particular the essay, 'Fifty Years of People's Fronts'. For Hobsbawm, unity between groups and parties created effective conditions for progress, or, when necessary, the best mode of defence. Historically and personally, the consequence of failing to achieve alliances in the 1930s was witnessed in Berlin in his childhood, as he recalls in *Interesting Times*. Perhaps his most famous political intervention however was *The Forward March of Labour Halted*. Originally given as a Lecture, Hobsbawm's words went on to be a ringing challenge to political assumptions long held by people across the Labour Party, Trade Unions and the left. Using his historical insight, Hobsbawm questioned if elements that had gone into making an organised working class, given it consciousness of a common place in history and enabling advance toward social equality, were now declining. The thesis was met by a range of responses, and the whole, assimilated under the title of Hobsbawm's talk, has come to define an intellectual and political moment.

Nations and Nationalism since 1780, represented a turn of attention by Hobsbawm. Published in 1990, the book was perhaps a sign of writing to come. In it, Hobsbawm

addressed the large questions of the forging of nations, their longevity, criteria for existing, and potential as future units by which people could organise themselves. His answers given in a very readable style, make understandable what have been problematic issues for historians and others. Hobsbawm reveals too perhaps his own life and politics, where the consequence of nationalism and imperial conflict have wrought devastation on a scale never previous known, by almost continuous warfare from 1914 to 1945. *Nations and Nationalism* is a guide through these complex issues, offering empirical examples to illustrate the broader conceptual points. It is also challenging, upsetting cosy ideas that 'our' nation and its heritage draws on some endless time of which we are a part in a seamless continuity. Eric Hobsbawm arguably succeeds in disavowing such lazy assumptions, demonstrating instead the historical novelty of nation states and their susceptibility to collapse.

The last area of writing is historiography. Perhaps the most obviously academic, it is a matter that exists almost entirely within the academy, and perhaps says far more about academics than it does about the state of historical study, and certainly not its widespread popularity. Often guilty of esoteric navel gazing, historiography can be a conversation among the insecure, with little heed to everyone else. Eric Hobsbawm's collection *On History*, is among the best found by any single writer on the subject. Surgically assessing some of the worst excesses such as post-modernism, the essays reflect a keen mind who yet has overseen the squabbles, and can place the different view points in their longer historical context. What also distinguishes the essays in *On History* from the academic textbook is, again, their enjoyable style. They will require more effort than the more direct historical essay, but it is worth it for the map they provide of what has been happening in the writing of history, and from a man who has already lived through what he is talking about and understood the debates as a participant and assessor. One other book in this category worth noting is *Echoes of the Marseillaise*. It is strictly historiographical, concerning itself with changing interpretations and presentations of the French Revolution over the past two hundred years. Its task is to refute one recent trend in writing, which is to denigrate the revolution as unnecessary excess, not least because it made very little difference. This 'revisionist' account is well tackled by Hobsbawm and the book is a good illustration of how a historian can contend a trend and show its weakness.

Eric Hobsbawm was a man of many words, written and spoken. A great number of those have come to provide a map whereby we can find our way around the world as it is understood today. Key features are perhaps arbitrary to draw when what has been given so encapsulates our common experience. However, three features might be said to characterise Eric Hobsbawm's writing. The first and arguably most important is that they are readable. Hobsbawm neither talks down to us nor does he wantonly sail over our heads in a language often used to deliberately mask intent. Instead, he seeks to communicate, requiring the reader to do their share of the work, but in a partnership aimed toward a democratic raising of understanding. It is a generational feature, and one arguably owed to teaching adults whether through Workers Education Class, or in Hobsbawm's case the evening college of London University; Birkbeck. The second feature is a capacity to draw together the local and the global. The perhaps wider realisation of the political shoemaker has already been cited, but it was distinction particularly of his social history, that while he was focusing on a particular, the lesson could be learnt for other times and places. *Uncommon People* published in 1998, is a fine example of just this process. The last feature of his writing links to his speaking; Eric Hobsbawm was an enthusiast. An enthusiast for history, for teaching, for debating and

ultimately for living, Eric Hobsbawm has left us a library of writing, and an open invitation to come and read.

As to speaking, that now will be heard only from recording. Having been our guide, and friend, through all our lives, the person to whom the voice belongs is no longer with us. A salute Eric; old comrade.

Stephen Woodhams
October 2012