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# A past master to remember

Review by Mark Mazower

## Eric Hobsbawm's writing uncovers the man behind the historian

**Fractured Times: Culture and Society in the 20th Century**, by Eric Hobsbawm, *Little Brown, RRP£25, 336 pages*

After Eric Hobsbawm's death last year there was high praise for a historian of unparalleled range but also plenty of criticism, verging in some quarters on scorn, for his unapologetic communism. Neither shed much light on his intellectual significance. Now comes this posthumously published assortment of essays, lectures and reviews – a bit of a mixed bag, which takes as its main theme the changing position of culture and ideas over the past 200 years. Most readers will find Hobsbawm as penetrating on these matters as he is on the industrial revolution and the spread of imperialism. But the real interest of *Fractured Times*, I think, lies in what it tells us about the man himself, and the reminder it gives us of what an unusual and important historian he was.

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Eric Hobsbawm in 1989

A globalist before the word became a cliché, he roamed naturally in his thought and writing across continents and oceans. Take as an example one single paragraph from the study of world religions in this collection: a few sentences suffice to encompass charismatic Protestantism in the Americas, Islamic resurgence in Indonesia, the travails of Orthodoxy and Catholicism in the former Soviet bloc, and the continuing secularisation of the industrialised west. Fortunately for the rest of us, he had the modesty to admit that his knowledge of Thai Buddhism was limited. His chronological range was perhaps less unusual – although any scholar who could contribute both to debates about the 17th-century European agrarian economy and 21st-century US foreign policy was scarcely suffering from tunnel vision.

Three factors lay behind this expansive outlook. One was his background

as an émigré Jew at home in precisely the two rather different milieus that one would probably choose as an aspiring historian of modernity. England was where he passed his entire professional life. He may have been born in Egypt, in Alexandria, but in these essays he seems as comfortable describing the Holborn Empire music hall and the ukulele-strumming George Formby as the educational differences between Bedford and Stonyhurst public schools.

At the same time, his childhood in Vienna and Berlin left him with an enduring bittersweet affection for a vanished *Mitteleuropa*, birthplace of Marxism and Nazism, of psychoanalysis and of the high culture that absorbs him here. A deep subterranean emotion runs through the superb piece on the Austrian satirist Karl Kraus, whom Hobsbawm describes with the familiarity of someone who had grown up reading him in the original German. In art Paul Klee provides the gold standard, against which today's young media-savvy artists are judged to be deficient in passion, wit or social conscience. Asking how well older conceptions of high culture were faring in the age of Jeff Koons and Twitter, Hobsbawm complains that artists have adopted the form of an avant-garde without the substance: the old belief in social transformation so common in the 1920s has vanished from their work.

Still, the émigré background by itself explains little. Plenty of émigré historians were involved in the transformation of postwar British and American academia, but virtually none could emulate Hobsbawm's kaleidoscopic curiosity – indeed, many transferred their national snobberies to their new homeland across the Channel (or Atlantic). Hobsbawm's Europe was never solely German-speaking and his books – *Fractured Times* is no exception – are peppered with references to works in a bewildering number of languages.

The much more important reason for his breadth of view was, of course, Marxism. In the 1950s and 1960s, when Hobsbawm began his career as a teacher and scholar, the world was changing rapidly thanks to decolonisation and the transformation of third-world agrarian societies into urban ones. This epochal transition was at once economic, social and political and it attracted anyone concerned with understanding the larger global shift that was going on beneath the noise and fury of the cold war. Lots of people were writing about this, some of the best of them on the left, but an awful lot got sidetracked by an obsession with theoretical models – and this was something to which Hobsbawm was always immune.

If Marxism gave him the tools to examine the globalisation of capital in its broadest sense, it also gave him a vision of his own vocation. Those he really admired were thinkers with a commitment to social betterment through the popularisation of ideas, polymaths such as Joseph Needham, the great historian of Chinese science, or the scientist JD Bernal, whom he discusses with sympathy here.

It also helped that anything less like an ivory tower than Birkbeck, the old London working men's college where Hobsbawm taught most of his life, is hard to imagine.

The early and mid-20th century was, for Hobsbawm, the apogee of the engaged intellectual. He welcomes the expansion of higher education since but notes that in many countries it has proved all too easy to stigmatise academics as members of some suspect liberal elite. He hopes that the ongoing crisis of capitalism might change things and remind people of the need for a united front of ordinary people and intellectuals that could give power to ideas. But he was never a sentimentalist and his own view is that such a united front is unlikely to materialise.

All this still, as Hobsbawm liked to say, leaves us with a question. How did he manage to convey this extraordinarily panoptic and rather subtle historical vision to so many people? Gaining encyclopedic knowledge was impressive enough; knowing how to convey its essence to a vast audience involved the rarest kind of authorial talent. Sticking to one country, after all, would have made the writing itself easier. But as the many critics of British education secretary Michael Gove are pointing out during the current controversy over the national curriculum, simple storylines in our interconnected world do not usually make for good history.

The least insular of men, Hobsbawm found the prose he needed. There is no flash, no airs and graces, none of the self-conscious minimalism of a Tacitus or an AJP Taylor. The style is sinewy, unadorned, a Routemaster bus that gets you where you want to go, democratically and efficiently. Numbers are not crunched but neither are they avoided. And Hobsbawm is always thinking out loud – "this leaves us with a question"; "the problem is". Lists are a characteristic device – providing authority, but also a challenge, an implicit invitation to make your own list in response. I liked those here that show how the years 1901-14 were good for female Nobel laureates but bad for English female novelists.

Hobsbawm's argumentativeness, playful in its own way, is much in evidence here and one has to pinch oneself to recall that some of these pieces were written by a man aged over 90. Why do billionaires like buying football clubs rather than opera houses? What do the 2012 London Olympics tell us about the future of national monuments? Why is there no Chinese equivalent of the dude ranch? The questions, and the answers, kept coming to the very end.

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