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MEMORIAL

Eric John Ernest Hobsbawm, 1917–2012

David Blackbourn

ERIC Hobsbawm died in London on October 1, 2012, at the age of 95. Every reader of this journal will know his name; most will have read at least some of his work. Eric Hobsbawm was among the greatest historians of the twentieth century and by the time of his death had become one of the best-known historians in the world. He was startlingly knowledgeable about everything under the sun and a restless asker of questions, often big questions. Eric Hobsbawm was a prolific author of incisive essays and books written in the clear, sinewy prose that was his hallmark. The most widely read of his works are the four volumes that make up his "Age of" tetralogy, but he wrote on a remarkable range of subjects, from the general crisis of the seventeenth century to modern nationalism, from crime and social protest to the invention of tradition, from the debate about the standard of living in the Industrial Revolution to the misuse of history in the present. The power and influence of his historical writing came from a combination of qualities—erudition, analytical clarity, the power of synthesis, and sheer originality. He also wrote on jazz, initially under the pseudonym Francis Newton, the name of a communist trumpet player who accompanied the peerless Billie Holiday. Eric Hobsbawm was a Marxist from the time that he became politically aware, which was very early in life, and it is hard to think of any historian who put Marxist ideas to better or more sophisticated use.

Eric Hobsbawm was born in 1917—the only possible year, surely, in which he could have been born. His father Leopold Percy Hobsbaum was the second-generation British son of a Polish-Jewish cabinet maker who went to London in the 1870s. Leopold was working in a shipping office in Alexandria, Egypt on the eve of World War I when he met and fell in love with Nelly Grün, the daughter of a Viennese jeweler. They were married at the British Consulate in neutral Zurich and returned to Alexandria, where their first child Eric was born on June 9, 1917. The family moved to Vienna, with the result that Eric spent his childhood "in the impoverished capital of a great empire, attached, after the empire's collapse, to a smallish provincial republic of great beauty, which did not believe it ought to exist."[1]

[1] Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), 8.

The Hobsbawms struggled financially. Then, in 1929, his father died of a heart attack at the age of forty-eight, and his mother died two years later of tuberculosis. (A photograph in his autobiography shows an uncannily recognizable, thirteen-year-old Eric, in shorts and white knee socks, with his mother outside an Alpine sanatorium.) Eric and his sister Nancy were taken by their Uncle Sidney to live in Berlin, where Eric read Marx and was recruited to the communist *Sozialistischer Schülerbund*. It was on the way home by train from the Prinz-Heinrichs-Gymnasium in Wilmersdorf to Halensee that he heard the news of Hitler's appointment as chancellor. Less than three months later Uncle Sidney took the family to London.

Eric was educated at the St. Marylebone Grammar School, read precociously, and was introduced by a cousin to jazz ("the unanswerable sound") when he heard Duke Ellington play at the Streatham Empire in south London. He won a scholarship to King's College Cambridge in 1936. A diary entry at the time described "a tall, angular, dangly, ugly, fair-haired fellow of eighteen and a half, quick on the uptake, with a considerable if superficial stock of general knowledge and a lot of original ideas, general and theoretical."[2] At Cambridge he had rooms beneath Ludwig Wittgenstein's and was, like other talented members of his generation, both a Cambridge Apostle and an active communist. He graduated in 1939 with a starred First and took off for France, where he learned that Hitler had invaded Poland. He arrived back in London just before war broke out. Rejected for intelligence work because of his politics, he instead joined the Royal Engineers, where he "lived among workers—overwhelmingly English workers—and in doing so acquired a permanent, if often exasperated, admiration for their uprightness, their distrust of bullshit, their sense of class, comradeship and mutual help."[3]

After the war Eric Hobsbawm began research on the Fabian Society. His first academic publication appeared in 1948, a collection of documents called *Labour's Turning Point*.[4] The previous year he had been appointed to a lectureship in history at Birkbeck College, the former Mechanics' Institute or workingmen's college that was now a part of London University, beginning an association that would last for sixty-five years. Eric took immediately to the friendly, left-leaning Birkbeck and its sympathetic students. It was an academic and emotional home during the Cold-War years when his politics sometimes created difficulties in the climate of a muted, very British McCarthyism. He was a leading member of the celebrated Historians' Group of the British Communist Party, along with Christopher Hill, E. P. Thompson, John Saville, Rodney Hilton, George

[2]Ibid., 98.
[3]Ibid., 159.
[4]Eric Hobsbawm, *Labour's Turning Point, 1880–1900: Extracts from Contemporary Sources* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1948).

Rudé, Victor Kiernan, and others. This was the milieu out of which the journal *Past and Present* was founded in 1952. Eric Hobsbawm was one of the founders, assistant editor of the first issue, and a regular contributor. In the 1950s, when Hobsbawm's principal medium was still the scholarly article, he published some of the most important of those articles in the journal. They included his pathbreaking discussion of "The Machine Breakers" and two pieces on the "general crisis of the seventeenth century," major contributions to what became an important debate.[5] He was also a key figure in broadening the editorial board of *Past and Present*, very willing to drop the original subtitle ("A Journal of Scientific History") as a condition of recruiting John Elliott and Lawrence Stone as new members in 1958.[6]

By then Eric was in his early forties and had just one book, a collection of documents, to his name. That would change the following year with the appearance of a remarkable and pioneering work, *Primitive Rebels*.[7] It was based on a series of lectures given at Manchester University, supplemented by additional published and broadcast material. The book testifies to Hobsbawm's interest in movements of the poor and outcast, history's losers. It ranges dazzlingly across the worlds of rural bandits, urban rioters and millenarians, taking in the Italian Mafia, Andalusian anarchists, and labor sects such as the Primitive Methodists. Hobsbawm wanted to do justice to the rituals and social codes of groups that had usually been dismissed or overlooked completely. He succeeded, without sentimentality, in a probing, argumentative work that could not have been more different from the parochial mainstream of British history in the late 1950s.

Two works in a similar vein followed. *Captain Swing*, coauthored with George Rudé, is an imaginative reconstruction of the causes, motives, and means of expression of the uprising among English agricultural laborers in 1830—a history of "the rise and fall of their improvised, archaic, spontaneous movements of resistance to the full triumph of rural capitalism."[8] Hobsbawm and Rudé used quantitative evidence (the incidence of arson, the duration and timing of agrarian riots in 1830) to make their case, while they recognized what aggregate statistics cannot tell us. *Captain Swing* is analytically acute; it is also filled with the particularities of place and the names of hitherto forgotten individuals. Above all, the book attends closely to the language and forms used by the insurgents—it is concerned with meaning. *Bandits* is a more slender volume, but has an extraordinary

[5]Eric Hobsbawm, "The Machine Breakers," *Past and Present* 1 (February 1952): 57–70; Eric Hobsbawm, "The General Crisis of the European Economy in the 17th Century," *Past and Present* 5 (May 1954): 33–53; Eric Hobsbawm, "The Crisis of the 17th Century—II," *Past and Present* 6 (November 1954): 44–65.

[6]Sir John Elliott, *Times*, October 5, 2012.

[7]Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959).

[8]Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé, *Captain Swing* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1968), 19.

range.[9] It moves confidently from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, from the Balkans to China and Latin America. Folklore and legend are interrogated; the representations of bandits in woodcuts, paintings, and on the screen are examined. Hobsbawm asks, what is social banditry and who becomes a bandit? His answer is that there seems to be a surprisingly universal typology of genuinely "social" (i.e., not simply criminal) bandits: "the noble robber," "the avenger," "the primitive resistance fighter." These influential books on crime and rebellion were important in stimulating work in the Federal Republic by historians such as Dirk Blasius and Carsten Küther.[10]

Hobsbawm later wrote that the years on either side of 1960 formed a watershed in his life.[11] His wartime marriage to a fellow communist, Muriel Seaman, had broken down, and he now—like his father—met and fell in love with a Viennese-born girl, Marlene Schwarz. They married in 1962, during the Cuban missile crisis, a second marriage that brought him great happiness. In the same years major works appeared that made his name. The first book in what turned out eventually to be a magnificent quartet came out in 1962. *The Age of Revolution* traces the impact of the dual revolutions of the late-eighteenth century, the Industrial Revolution in Britain, the political revolution in France. It is a bold structural history, impressive in reach and laced with the telling details that made Eric Hobsbawm's books so readable.[12] *The Age of Revolution* opens by talking about the words that were coined or gained their modern meaning in the period from 1789 to 1848 (they include "engineer," "statistics," and "journalism" as well as "factory," "industry," and "proletariat"); it closes with a series of maps that show, among other things, the areas of Europe that were influenced by French legal codes and the opera houses where three popular operas were performed. *The Age of Revolution* set a pattern followed in later volumes of dealing seriously with science and the arts, and not only in the chapters devoted to those subjects. The book was described as "brilliant" by reviewers in the *New Statesman*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, and the *English Historical Review*, an improbable trifecta.

Two years later Hobsbawm brought together some of his major articles and papers on nineteenth-century British history in a volume called *Labouring Men*.[13] This contained articles on the standard of living during early English industrialization, a debate that had been vigorously engaged in the pages of the

[9]Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969).

[10]Dirk Blasius, *Bürgerliche Gesellschaft und Kriminalität. Zur Sozialgeschichte Preussens im Vormärz* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976); Dirk Blasius, *Kriminalität und Alltag* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978); Carsten Küther, *Räuber und Gauner. Das organisierte Bandenwesen im 18. und frühen 19. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976).

[11]Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 219.

[12]Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962).

[13]Eric Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964).

Economic History Review; it also contained some of Hobsbawm's classic early contributions to working-class history—on machine breakers, the tramping artisan, labor aristocracy, and the new unionism of the late-nineteenth century. I can still remember the sense of excitement when I read *Labouring Men* as an undergraduate, savoring both the way the book recovers lived experience and the restless, probing arguments. Then, in 1968, *Industry and Empire* appeared, a powerful synthesis of Hobsbawm's thinking about the economic, social, and cultural impact of the British industrial revolution. It placed what happened in Britain after 1750 within the framework of global capitalism and took the account up to the 1960s world of mass tourism and youth culture.[14]

The 1960s brought many changes that were unwelcome to Hobsbawm—the final eclipsing of jazz by rock music, for example. There is a vignette in Hobsbawm's autobiography of Eric and Marlene visiting San Francisco in summer 1967, where he remained magnificently unmoved by Haight-Ashbury or the Fillmore. Yet something was clearly afoot, and not just in California. Hobsbawm wrote in his memoirs about the cultural revolution of the 1960s, "I always taught the students in my labour history courses that the great dockers' strike of 1889, which is prominent in every textbook, may be less significant than the silent adoption by masses of Britain's industrial workers, some time between 1880 and 1905, of a form of headgear recognizable as a badge of belonging to their class, the familiar peaked cap. It may be argued that the really significant index of the history of the second half of the twentieth century is not ideology or student occupations, but the forward march of blue jeans."[15] The political movements of the 1960s nonetheless interested Hobsbawm (of course). He was an active member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament at the beginning of the decade; he traveled to Cuba three times during the 1960s, on one occasion acting as Che Guevara's interpreter; he found himself in Paris during the May events of 1968, and he addressed a Cambridge sit-in the same year.

It was in the 1960s that Hobsbawm began to write articles and review essays about his own time: on communist and anarchist movements, intellectuals of the left, guerrilla war, and the problems of revolution. A collection of these essays appeared in 1973 under the title *Revolutionaries*.[16] In other ways, too, Hobsbawm became an important commentator on his own times. Unlike most members of the Historians' Group, he had not left the British Communist Party in 1956 but remained a member until its eventual dissolution in 1991. His sympathies were with what emerged in the 1970s as the "Eurocommunist"

[14]Eric Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire: An Economic History of Britain since 1750* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968).

[15]Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 261.

[16]Eric Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973).

wing of the Communist Party. These views were set out in a number of conversations with the prominent Italian communist (and, since 2006, Italian president) Giorgio Napolitano and published in 1977 as *The Italian Road to Socialism*.[17] Closer to home, Hobsbawm's searching, unsentimental response to the advent of Thatcherism in 1979, a series of articles collected together as *The Forward March of Labour Halted?*, became an important marker of rethinking on the British left.[18] The articles continued in the 1980s, typically appearing first in *Marxism Today* before being reprinted in *The Guardian*.[19] They conferred on a sixty-something Marxist historian the reputation as the intellectual guru of Neil Kinnock after his election as leader of the Labour Party in 1983, and they made Hobsbawm one of the intellectual forerunners of "New Labour," however much he may have been at odds with many of the directions New Labour revisionism would take.

Eric Hobsbawm's authority as a political commentator was inseparable from his growing fame as a historian. *The Age of Capital, 1848–1875* appeared in 1975, the magnificent second volume in the series.[20] It had the same virtues as its predecessor—the energy, sweep, and power of generalization—but was more intellectually supple. The interpretive corset had been loosened a little and the writing seemed even more accessible. The geographical as well as conceptual scope was wider than it had been in *The Age of Revolution* because Hobsbawm was now writing about a triumphant capitalist system of truly global reach. That is the subject of a wonderful third chapter ("The World Unified"), which takes us through the many ways in which webs of interdependence were spun—through trade, exploration, the role of the steamship, railway, telegraph and undersea cable, international agreements, and cultural standardization. Hobsbawm writes about the gold rushes of the period, about the great engineers, about the "romance of industry." A reference to Jules Verne is perhaps predictable in such a chapter; more unexpected is the beautifully apposite reference to the image of the steam train in Satjadjit Ray's film *Pather Panchali* and the evidence we are given about the translation of Dickens into Portuguese, Swedish, Czech, and Hungarian.

[17]Eric Hobsbawm, *The Italian Road to Socialism: An Interview* (Westport, CN: L. Hill, 1977).

[18]Eric Hobsbawm et al., *The Forward March of Labour Halted?*, ed. Martin Jacques and Francis Mulhern (London: Verso, 1981).

[19]I found one of these articles tucked inside a book of Hobsbawm's. Dating from 1982, it is called "Rebuilding the Left for a New Europe" and is notable for two things. One is the clarity with which Hobsbawm delineated the components of a new left made up of "special interests" (his term) such as the peace movement, environmentalists, and the women's movement; the other is the tough-mindedness with which he recorded the socioeconomic reasons for the irreversible decline of the old mass left. "It is not enough to deplore the decline of 'the movement' from the great old days," he wrote. "Nostalgia will not bring them back." Eric Hobsbawm, "Rebuilding the Left for a New Europe," *The Guardian*, September 27, 1982.

[20]Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital, 1848–1875* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975).

I thought at the time that *The Age of Capital* would be hard to better as a work of historical synthesis. *The Age of Empire* proved me wrong.[21] It came out in 1987 and was expected at the time to be the third and final volume in the sequence. In a review I called it "the outstanding volume of a distinguished trilogy, the product of a large and generous historical imagination."[22] Hobsbawm presents a compelling double image of the world between 1875 and 1914. This was a stable international order based on material expansion, the gold standard, and the seemingly effortless command of imperialists. Its domestic counterpart was the social hierarchy of upstairs-downstairs. Against this, Hobsbawm sets upheaval and uncertainty at home and abroad. Socialism and feminism threatened—like the declining supply of domestic servants—to cloud the bourgeois high summer. So did the mass mobilization of groups such as the peasantry and a resentful lower-middle class. Moreover, while the economically dominant countries sold capital equipment and manufactured goods around the globe, they unwittingly exported social unrest and new ideas about political organization. The revolutions in Turkey, Mexico, and China before 1914 were a sign of things to come. The war would quicken the process, argues Hobsbawm, as it would the working-class challenge. Unintended consequences of a different kind structure his account of how war broke out. Hobsbawm notes that most capitalists were against it, and he was skeptical whether governments went to war to head off domestic discontent. But he showed how the open-endedness of imperial rivalry changed the terms of great-power conflict, prevented international agreements that would stick, and eventually induced a mood of fatalism. *The Age of Empire* is as strong as you would expect it to be on the emergence of labor and socialist movements—indeed, the chapter on this subject is as good a thirty-page account as you could find anywhere. The book also has a very impressive chapter on the "New Woman." And—this was by now a Hobsbawm trademark—it covers science, technology, the arts, and popular culture superbly. *The Age of Empire* is more richly textured even than its predecessors in discussing everyday objects or practices and placing them into their precise social setting, whether Tiffany lamp or tango, motor car or music hall.

One thing that Hobsbawm shows is how purposefully traditions were constructed in the decades before 1914, especially by rulers who saw in rituals, ceremonial, and heroic statues a means of eliciting popular support in uncertain times. He also notes the emergence of the cowboy myth in the U.S. (which excluded real Mexican cowboys), while his chapter on nationalism ("Waving Flags") is concerned with the ways in which national identity was constructed by folklorists and dictionary makers. This was territory that Hobsbawm also covered in his Wiles Lectures of 1985, published in 1990 as *Nations and*

[21]Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987).
[22]David Blackbourn,"The Empire Strikes Back," *Marxism Today*, November 1987, 51.

Nationalism.[23] The 1980s were, of course, the decade of the constructivist turn, when everything became imagined, constructed, and invented. Hobsbawm played an important part in this shift. Preceding *The Age of Empire* and *Nations and Nationalism*, preparing the way for them intellectually, was a 1983 essay collection that Hobsbawm coedited with Terence Ranger. *The Invention of Tradition* came out of a Past and Present conference.[24] The phrase caught on immediately, like the title of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, published the same year. The idea was in the air.[25] What Hobsbawm and his fellow contributors did was to pin the concept down and show its usefulness in many different settings. The book includes articles on the nineteenth-century British monarchy, Highland Scotland, Wales, Victorian India, and colonial Africa. Hobsbawm wrote the general introduction to the volume and its closing article, a powerful, characteristically wide-ranging piece on "Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe 1870–1914." As Roy Foster has pointed out, the root idea of "inventing tradition" can be found much earlier in Hobsbawm's work, in his contribution to an earlier Past and Present conference that was published as an article in the journal as early as 1972.[26] The article builds on Hobsbawm's earlier interest in how "traditional" communities respond to change. Their understanding of the past is, he argues, often "stretched or modified" so that innovation can be reformulated as non-innovation. In this way change is legitimized. But when social change accelerates beyond a certain point, it is clearly impossible to reproduce or restore the past that is being invoked; then the past becomes an artifact or fabrication. Hobsbawm notes that nationalist movements have been prominent among those who serve up "fabricated history." The analysis here is acute and careful, as it is in the introduction to *The Invention of Tradition*. Hobsbawm differentiates between tradition and custom, old and new traditions, genuine and invented traditions. Not all of those who have since used the concept have been as careful. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger both remarked in later years that they had never suggested all traditions were invented.

By the time the Wiles Lectures appeared as a book in 1990, the world had changed. The focus of Hobsbawm's writing changed as well. In a 1993 lecture on "The Present as History," he referred to himself as someone who for most

[23]Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[24]Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[25]The text of my contribution to *Mythen deutscher Geschichtsschreibung* (written in 1979) included a reference to the "'invention' of cultural traditions," which was translated, rather clunkily, as the "'Erfinden' von kulturellen Traditionen." David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *Mythen deutscher Geschichtsschreibung. Die gescheiterte bürgerliche Revolution von 1848* (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1980), 79.

[26]Roy Foster, "Eric Hobsbawm," *Past and Present* 218 (2013): 9–10; E. J. Hobsbawm, "The Social Function of the Past: Some Questions," *Past and Present* 55 (1972): 3–17.

of his career had "deliberately kept away, at least in his professional writings, though not in his extracurricular ones, from the world after 1914."[27] As hostilities in the Balkans turned the 1914 events in Sarajevo retrospectively into the first Sarajevo crisis, the gap between "extracurricular" and "professional" writings now became much narrower. The lecture on "The Present as History" was delivered shortly before Hobsbawm published the fourth volume of his great series, *The Age of Extremes*.[28] The first three volumes made us familiar with the idea of a "long nineteenth century"; the last volume did the same for the "short twentieth century." It required a big book to take the measure of that century—much longer than the earlier volumes, and not only longer but more personal. Hobsbawm organizes the book into three sections: the "age of catastrophe" from 1914 to 1945, "the golden age" of the *trente glorieuses* that lasted until the 1970s, and the "landslide" of the twenty years that followed, "a world which lost its bearings and slid into instability and crisis."[29] This last major work of synthesis has the same wide range as its predecessors, the same spiky curiosity about everything. Hobsbawm writes with extraordinary freshness about the transformations of the twentieth century in science and education, as he does about humankind's growing capacity to destroy its environment and perpetrate mass murder—and I suppose I should note that he writes lucidly and frankly about the millions who died as a result of "Stalinist tyranny."[30] There are also some wonderful set pieces on endings: the death of the peasantry, the death of the avant-garde, the end of socialism. In the years after *The Age of Extremes* appeared, Hobsbawm continued to write about his own time—about globalization, the Balkan wars, the post-Cold-War resurgence of nationalism, the rise of private armies and security forces, the return of "barbarism."[31] Then, in 2002, he published *Interesting Times*, his remarkable autobiography. At a ninetieth birthday celebration for Eric at Birkbeck in 2007, I touched on how difficult it must have been for him to turn to the twentieth century, given the gap between the hopes his own life embodied and the dreadful realities. As I said then, what struck me about his later works is that they combine the originality and acuteness we had come to take for granted with a continued sense of hope and grace that is extraordinary, in a human as well as an intellectual sense.

[27]The Creighton Lecture at the University of London, reprinted in Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 228–40, quotation 228.

[28]Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994).

[29]Ibid., 403.

[30]Ibid., 143. Hobsbawm has many other references to the "murderous absurdity" of Stalinism.

[31]Many of these discussions can be found in the collection of interviews originally conducted in Italian and published in English as *On the Edge of the New Century*, Eric Hobsbawm in conversation with Antonio Polito (New York: The New Press, 2000). His essay "Barbarism: A User's Guide" was delivered as an Amnesty Lecture in 1994, printed in *New Left Review* 206 (1994): 44–54, and reprinted in Hobsbawm, *On History*, 253–65.

I was a Cambridge undergraduate when I first met Eric in the late 1960s. He came to speak about the French 68ers, about whom he had little good to say. He was clear-eyed, even acerbic, but in retrospect right on the money—although *Age of Extremes* and the autobiography both record his later acknowledgement of the cultural importance of the sixties and of 1968 as a "signal." I had already read some of his books, and his work accompanied me through graduate studies and beyond. There was no historian I admired more, none who influenced me more, not because of any one book but because of his intellectual curiosity and generous vision of history. That was true of other German historians of my generation. We were colleagues in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when I was hired at Birkbeck to replace the "European" part of Eric, a thankless task. Students would talk about Eric's inspired teaching. One story I heard more than once was the lecture in which he explained how you could determine the nature of the political regime in Germany at a given time by looking at the colors in the national flag. Here was a glimpse of Eric the semiotician, reading the flag as text before that sort of thing became fashionable. One also heard stories from colleagues about Eric as a member of the University of London board of examiners in history. By then I was familiar with those examiners' meetings, especially the proofreading meetings interminably prolonged by arguments about italics, semicolons, and the always vexing issue of capitalization. (One chair of the board endeared himself to me when he closed discussion by announcing that he had personally always been anticapitalist but it was time to move on—how Eric would have approved.) Eric reportedly sat out these meetings behind a barricade of books and journals—there would be an anthropological work about Peru, a book on Hungarian economic history (in German), a few Italian journals—until discussion turned to the spelling of some obscure Balkan proper name and from behind the barricade could be heard Eric's voice, crushingly, "no, it's always spelled with a 'c' and a diacritical, always." Whatever levity Eric permitted himself vis-à-vis the history board of examiners, nobody ever doubted his devotion to Birkbeck. The same is true of *Past and Present*, with which his association lasted almost as long. We became colleagues there when I joined the editorial board in 1988. He, Lawrence Stone, and Edward Thompson were all formidable figures, but in different ways. While the other two commanded great rhetorical powers, Eric was more *sachlich*. His authority came from the acuteness and quiet power of his arguments. He disliked jargon and theoretical posturing—one of the things he shared with Edward Thompson was a lively skepticism about work that emanated from self-consciously theoretical American history departments. He often found it meretricious. Why not encourage articles instead by less showy and self-satisfied historians in Europe, Latin America, or the Indian subcontinent?

Eric's vision of history was indeed generous, something his own writing demonstrates. But readers of his books or the essays that make up *On History*

will be able to form a clear picture of his likes and dislikes. He was a materialist historian with a genius for fine-grain social and cultural history who nonetheless regretted the decline of economic history. He believed passionately in history "from below" while remaining skeptical of oral history ("a slippery medium").[32] He never doubted that history mattered in the present but disliked too-easy forms of presentism. Referring years later to a talk given to students who were occupying the Cambridge Old Schools, he wrote, "I think my suggestion that even the history of eras lost in the mists of antiquity such as the nineteenth century could be 'relevant'—the buzzword of the moment—disappointed them."[33] He was a great champion of the *Annales* school, whose work did much to shake up the insular world of postwar British history, and a pioneer in pointing to what historians could learn from anthropologists. On the other hand he was skeptical about postmodernism, "identity history," and psychology as a historical tool ("I don't think historians have an awful lot to learn from Freud, who was a bad historian").[34] Gender has been described as a "blind spot," with some justice, although that was much less true of his later writings.[35] Eric could and did change his mind, about history, politics, and everything that his mind ranged over. I once heard a broadcast in which he talked about his conversion to modern jazz in middle age, and added, "It shows you don't have to stop."

Like just about all the Marxist and progressive intellectuals of his generation I have known, Eric enjoyed walking in the hills—the Welsh hills, in his case. That is a very British phenomenon and Eric was in many ways very British, indeed very English, as others have noted. Yet he was, of course, thoroughly cosmopolitan, with friends across Europe, in India, and in many parts of Latin America. He spent formative years in Vienna and Berlin, in the heart of *Mitteleuropa*. The great central European intellectuals—a Walter Benjamin, a Norbert Elias—were steeped in the world of high culture yet always curious about what was going on around them. Eric Hobsbawm was, in every sense, their heir. We see that curiosity in the attention he paid to modern science and communications, and in his insistence that we take the cinema and popular music seriously. Once, in a Mainz hotel room, I turned on the Arte TV channel and saw one very familiar face and another that seemed familiar. It was Eric and Jean-Luc Godard discussing (in French) the various cinematic representations of May Day.

Eric's love of jazz was of a piece. His view of rock music was certainly more reserved, although I do recall seeing him many years ago in a London record store buying an album by the Stranglers. This was just before Christmas, so it may have been intended as a holiday gift—but the Stranglers' best-known

[32]Eric Hobsbawm, "On History from Below," in Hobsbawm, *On History*, 201–16, quotation 206.
[33]Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 253.
[34]Hobsbawm, *On History*, 184.
[35]Mark Mazower, "Eric Hobsbawm: The History Man," *The Guardian*, October 1, 2012.

song, "No More Heroes," does feature Trotsky in the first line and an ice pick in the second, so who knows? The key point is that Eric's curiosity about popular culture never made him in the least sympathetic to the populist view that high culture can be written off as "elitist." In the "Age of" volumes he wrote superbly about opera and great works of literature.

Eric Hobsbawm's intellectual curiosity led him to write across a range of subjects that few have equaled. His acute intelligence and willingness to ask questions meant that even when he wrote about a subject you thought you knew, he made you see it fresh. He was a master of the telling detail who never lost sight of big issues ("historians cannot remain content with images and anecdotes, however significant. They need to specify and to count").[36] Not least—and this was something important to him—he wrote with a limpid clarity that serves as a model. Eric Hobsbawm was globally renowned by the end of his long life. His death has deprived us of a great historian.

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[36]Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*, 289, in a passage discussing the death of the peasantry.