

# THE NEW YORKER

## BOOKS

### LEFT BEHIND

*Is Eric Hobsbawm history?*

BY STEPHEN KOTKIN

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In London's National Portrait Gallery hangs a painting of seven people arranged on either side of a low table in a book-lined study. They are historians, members of the editorial board of the journal *Past & Present*, which arose from the British Communist Party's Historians' Group. The Communist Party never transformed Britain, as it had hoped, but the Historians' Group—formed in the mid-nineteen-forties—has a fair claim to have transformed the profession of history. Only a few generations earlier, the main concern of history, as taught at British, and American, universities, had been high politics—kings and popes (the sort whose portraits hang elsewhere in the gallery), as well as presidents and generals. This meant Great Men engaged in dramatic action, usually wars. It was the kind of history that might instruct a future corporate titan, and that, when done well, still sells, and not just around Father's Day.



The members of the Historians' Group directed their efforts elsewhere. Rodney Hilton, a medievalist, pointed out the importance of small market towns and linked the replacement of feudalism by capitalism to “class struggles” of the peasantry. Christopher Hill depicted the seventeenth-century English Civil War as a “bourgeois” revolution, and cast the religious dissenters—Levellers, Diggers, Ranters—as proto-Bolsheviks. E. P. Thompson, searching for signs of socialist revolution during the industrial revolution, presented the Yorkshire artisans of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century as radical democrats who compelled reforms with their song and struggle. “I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the ‘obsolete’ hand-loom weaver,” Thompson wrote, “from the enormous condescension of posterity.” It was a reasonably good motto for the new social historians.

None of these historians, though, achieved greater worldwide prominence than Eric Hobsbawm, a co-founder of *Past & Present*. His subject—pursued in a series of books that traced social, economic, and political developments from the French Revolution to the late twentieth century—was modernity itself. Perhaps Great Man history was dead, but Hobsbawm himself acquired something of the aura of a great man. He never had a “school”—the Historians’ Group, in the decade following the Second World War, met upstairs at the Garibaldi Restaurant, on London’s Saffron Hill—but he did have notoriety. In the Historians’ Group painting, Hobsbawm appears farthest to the left, and his placement is entirely appropriate. After the Soviet invasion of Hungary, in 1956, the other prominent Marxist historians—like countless idealists of their generation—renounced the Party. But Hobsbawm stuck it out, refusing to repudiate the Communist dream. And so an obvious question arises: How could such a celebrated and accomplished historian have remained so oblivious of the lessons of recent history?

**H**obsbawm, well into his ninth decade, has now published a disarming autobiography, “Interesting Times” (Pantheon; \$30), which offers answers, both contextual and personal. Hobsbawm’s father, a British subject and the son of a cabinetmaker of Polish-Jewish ancestry, was a failed tradesman; his mother, an Austro-Hungarian subject, was a novelist. The two married in Zurich—then also a refuge for Lenin, Joyce, and the Dadaists—when their respective empires were at war. Eric was born in British Egypt in 1917, the year of revolution in Russia. A couple of years later, this child of imperialism, war, and revolution moved with his parents to a defeated Vienna. By the Depression, Hobsbawm recalls, politics in Central Europe had been reduced to two colors: brown for the anti-Semitic right, and red for the revolutionary left. When Eric was twelve, his luckless, penurious father dropped dead of a heart attack on the front doorstep; his mother died two years later. Taken in by relatives of his father, Eric was relocated to Berlin in 1931—just in time to catch the death agony of the Weimar Republic. In 1933, Hitler was elevated to Chancellor. The Reichstag burned. The teen-age Hobsbawm distributed leaflets for the soon-to-be-banned German Communists in the March elections; it was, he writes, “my introduction to a characteristic experience of the communist movement: doing something hopeless and dangerous because the party told us to.” Being fair-haired and blue-eyed, he was identified as “*der Engländer*” rather than “*der Jude*.” The family, having British passports, soon fled to Britain, though out of financial desperation rather than a premonition of the Holocaust. What saved the twice-uprooted boy was the excellent conservative Prussian education he had received in Berlin, and the attention of one of his London grammar-school teachers, which enabled him to win a scholarship to King’s College,

Cambridge. And the rest, as they say, is history.

The young Eric Hobsbawm, flaunting his polyglot, cosmopolitan sense of self, was evidently less impressed with Cambridge than it was with him. “‘There’s a freshman in King’s who knows about everything,’ were the words that got around,” a 1939 profile in the college weekly, *Granta*, recounted of its outgoing editor. In “Interesting Times,” Hobsbawm writes of a finishing school still populated by “plenty of Ricardos and Darwins, Huxleys, Stracheys, and Trevelyans, both among the undergraduates and dons”; and his own college struck him as, for the most part, academically undistinguished. Still, the Cambridge of the nineteen-thirties, he gleefully recalls, “was the reddest and most radical generation in the history of the university, and I was in the thick of it.” He ascended to the three-person secretariat of the British Communist Party’s local student branch, whose “nursery of revolution was the set of rooms . . . just below Ludwig Wittgenstein.” The comrades railed against Hitler, and one of their triumvirate fell in the Spanish Civil War. “The 1930s were for us very far from the ‘low and dishonest decade’ of the disenchanting poet Auden,” Hobsbawm concludes. He absorbed Stalin’s “Short Course History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union” (1939), whose dialectical materialism “corresponded pretty much to what I, and perhaps most of the British intellectual reds of the 1930s, understood by Marxism.” Of Moscow’s spies, Blunt and the rest, in Cambridge, Hobsbawm writes, “We respected those who did it, and most of us—certainly I—would have taken it on ourselves if asked.” He was not the right sort to be recruited to betray the establishment. But, like Blunt, he was tapped for the Apostles, the Cambridge society whose rolls included Moore, Russell, Wittgenstein, Keynes, Whitehead, and Forster.

Of the Second World War, the epochal event of the century, Hobsbawm says, “I did nothing of significance in it, and was not asked to.” Called up in 1940, he spent six years in the armed forces, but he was inside Britain, largely with the Education Corps, and indignant that, despite his linguistic skills and his anti-fascist bona fides, he was denied an intelligence post. Not everyone will share his indignation: he divulges that when he was inducted he made arrangements to maintain contact with the British C.P., and while the Nazi-Soviet Pact was in force he had to toe the line and oppose war against Hitler.

In 1947, his politics notwithstanding, Hobsbawm landed a post at London’s Birkbeck College, an evening school for mature students. He commuted from Cambridge, continuing to occupy rooms gratis at King’s on a fellowship and to covet a permanent Cambridge position. That offer never came, and Hobsbawm blames an old Cambridge mentor, the staunchly anti-Communist Russian émigré M. M. Postan, and his “poisoned arrow” job references. But if Postan proved a troublesome colleague he was, for Hobsbawm, an indispensable teacher. He

looked like a Neanderthal, Hobsbawm recounts, but all the young radicals were attracted to his lectures on economic history, with their “air of intellectual revivalism,” and their improbable wealth of references, a continental rebuff to British insularity. As Hobsbawm writes, “What other don would have told us in 1936 to read the recent French *Annales d’histoire économique et sociale*, not yet famous even in its own country, to invite the great Marc Bloch to lecture in Cambridge?”

Indeed, few of Hobsbawm’s skills better served him than his adeptness in French, for the revolution in historiography that the British Marxists are credited with had really happened earlier, in France. The journal *Annales* was started in 1929, by Bloch and Lucien Febvre, two friends conversant with the new sciences of sociology and geography, psychology and anthropology. In histories of ways of life and ways of thinking, from the Middle Ages to 1800, they and their confrères focussed not on narratives of events—let alone the doings of statesmen and diplomats—but, as the journal’s subtitle eventually put it, on “economies, societies, civilizations.” After the Second World War, the insurgency grew into a new establishment, led by such luminaries as Fernand Braudel and his successor Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie.

At a time when English translations of monographs by the Annalistes were uncommon, Hobsbawm served as their man in London, fostering the sense that the New History was a single movement. Hobsbawm also befriended, and was befriended by, the *grands Parisiens*, and he is incisive on their theatricality and their formality. (“I cannot think of another country in which a notoriously womanizing, admittedly middle-aged philosopher in the 1950s still had as his stock-in-trade falling on his knees and presenting the lady with a rose,” he writes.) Braudel gave him an at-large affiliation, *directeur de recherche*, at his institute. In turn, Hobsbawm extended the Annalistes’ reach. Whereas the Annalistes focussed mainly on the world that was lost to modernity—and, in so doing, imagined that they had uncovered something too deep ever to be lost, *la France profonde*—Hobsbawm, of course, addressed more recent times. He acknowledges that Party dogma kept him from twentieth-century topics, but the Party also afforded a freemasonry of contacts, and made possible his discovery of overlooked eighteenth- and nineteenth-century social worlds. On a trip to Italy—he picked up Italian and Spanish on his travels—a Communist professor regaled him with tales of outlaws and millenarians, whom Hobsbawm then tracked “along Mediterranean back roads for the next few years.” The fruit of his researches, published in 1959, was “Primitive Rebels,” which captured this dying breed of brigands in still rural southern Europe, keenly alive to their self-dramatization and longing for social justice.

**L**ike Communism, jazz—Hobsbawm’s other great love—gave him access to an international

social network. In fact, he seems to have had political and musical conversions at roughly the same precocious age. When Hobsbawm was a teen-ager, he had caught Duke Ellington performing live at a London club. “It was the season when Ivy Anderson sang ‘Stormy Weather,’ ” he writes, adding that jazz substituted for “first love” and brought “wordless, unquestioning physical emotion” to his brutally cerebral existence. By the time he was an undergraduate, as the *Granta* profile reported, he played the mouth organ and could “go lyrical on the respective merits of ‘Pine-tops’ Smith, ‘Half-Pint’ Jaxon, and ‘Pee-Wee’ Russell.” By the mid-fifties, he was writing a jazz column for *New Statesman and Nation*, using the protective pseudonym Francis Newton (after a trumpeter and one of the few players known to have been a Communist). “The Jazz Scene,” published simultaneously with “Primitive Rebels,” brought the same distinctive, laconic prose and sociological skill to bear on another little-known, intricate milieu. Hobsbawm recounts that on his first trip to the United States, in 1960, he abandoned Stanford’s Palo Alto for San Francisco’s hip North Beach, then drove to Chicago and met the gospel singer Mahalia Jackson (and her onetime press agent Studs Terkel).

In 1962, the Rockefeller Foundation flew Hobsbawm first class to Latin America to continue his research into the flamboyant benefactors who robbed from the rich and gave to the poor. “Bandits,” the book that resulted, introduced characters—like the anarchist plumber Sabaté—who were so compelling, both as types and as individuals, that you wanted to head for the mountains and take on the whole political order, even without a foundation grant. Still, if “social” banditry, to a Marxist, wasn’t a crime, it was “archaic,” pre-capitalist; the bigger story was capitalism.

No less a capitalist than the publisher George Weidenfeld put Hobsbawm to the task. In 1958, Weidenfeld had asked him to contribute a volume to a series on the history of civilization, and in 1962 he published Hobsbawm’s “The Age of Revolution, 1789-1848,” which enlarged upon Marx’s fable that the contemporaneous British industrial and French political revolutions brought “the bourgeoisie” to power. With a Marxist—or was it Annaliste?—sense of the “totality” of experience, Hobsbawm related innovations in the arts and in the sciences to the economic “demand” of this ascending new class, both the cause and the consequence of political change. He also took a cue from the South Asians he had met at Cambridge in linking Britain’s industrial breakthrough to captive markets of colonial trade. A sequel, in 1975, “The Age of Capital, 1848-1875,” showed breathtaking range in encompassing the creation of a world economy. A third volume, “The Age of Empire, 1875-1914,” published in 1987, charted economic slumps, imperialist scrambles, and fratricidal war (the one during which Hobsbawm was born): its subject was the self-destruction of “the world made by and for the bourgeoisie.” In the academic Age of Specialization, Hobsbawm reëndowed history with

sweep. His trilogy drew mostly respectful assessments from “bourgeois” historians. “I love to read Eric Hobsbawm,” the Harvard historian David Landes wrote in a critical but appreciative review of “Age of Capital” in the *T.L.S.* “He knows so much; he reads everything; he translates German poetry into English rhyme.”

**I**n the discipline of history, anyway, the British Marxists had, like their Annaliste counterparts, become a new establishment. And yet a comparison of the two movements is instructive. For one thing, the Annales school was politically ambidextrous. Bloch died in the Resistance, but Philippe Ariès, who wrote Annales-style history while holding a day job at an institute of tropical plants, had belonged to the fascist Action Française and then worked for Vichy. In his imaginative scholarship on childhood, private life, and ways of death in medieval France, Ariès fashioned a conservative defense of the royalist and Catholic traditions that had produced him—traditions that retained popular appeal despite the secularism of the republic. (So much for the notion that the left alone invented social history.) At the same time, the Annalistes formulated a new paradigm for studying an epoch’s collective “*mentalité*.”

By contrast, the Marxist template of history came ready-made, even if the British adapted it to their own purposes—the demonstration that rebellious class consciousness was as English as kidney pie. The Marxist narrative was part of what made the work compelling, but it was a hindrance, too. Rodney Hilton’s attempts to tie peasant uprisings to the eruption of a new mode of production proved to be a dead end. So have Christopher Hill’s efforts to squeeze the English Civil War into the same scheme as the rise of capitalism. Only Thompson’s work has had a lasting influence: a lot of contemporary scholarship in subjects like gender relations and mass consumption really grows out of Thompson’s emphasis on culture, on the power of shared experience. But Thompson, of course, broke decisively with orthodox Marxism.

And Hobsbawm? In method, he stretched from Thompsonian populist protest (“Bandits”) to Braudellian structures (“The Ages” series). His big-picture Marxism struck a chord not just in the broadening left at Western universities but, thanks to his own peripatetic nature, across the Third World, too. And Hobsbawm offered something as well to the non-Marxists whose recognition he sought, for his triptych reads like a cultured, fine-detailed version of the mainstream scholarly consensus—the story of a transition from tradition to modernity, a story known as modernization. Modernization was the common cause that drew liberals to *Past & Present’s* “Popular Front” editorial board. Ironically, it was another Marxist, Arno Mayer, who exploded the formulas with his study “The Persistence of the Old Regime” (1981), which showed that aristocracies continued to dominate the ostensibly “bourgeois” century in Europe (let alone in, say, China). Only with the First World War were the old élites levelled, making

way for mass society and a people's history.

The elusive nineteenth-century “bourgeois” revolution, then, was less about an amorphous class than about the spread of law and new civic institutions. The *embourgeoisement* of vast areas of the planet, though real enough, was a distinctly twentieth-century phenomenon, and it haunts Hobsbawm's memoir, since it happened to his radical self, too. In the mid-fifties, Hobsbawm moved to Bloomsbury, near the West End clubs and the British Museum. Later, he spent half the year teaching in Manhattan, at the New School, landing a Greenwich Village office above the jazz club Bradley's. The hubs of London and New York, on the wings of Anglo-American power—not bad for a displaced orphan, up from the wreckage of old Europe. Having married a “Viennese-born girl,” and bought his first car and a house, he acquired a holiday cottage in the Welsh highlands, where the Hobsbawms and other second-home literati “voluntarily lived under the sort of conditions we condemned capitalism for imposing on its exploited toilers.” Hobsbawm's world, like the twentieth century, was constituted by total war, imperial ruin, artistic modernism, mass unemployment, displacement, and political fanaticism, but ultimately it saw the triumph of stability and prosperity—a triumph that he takes to be a defeat.

But if Hobsbawm was, as he writes, “unprepared to welcome an era of spectacular capitalist success,” he also resisted the New Left, remarking that he did not wear jeans. In the nineteen-seventies, he briefly became a political guru, denouncing Old Labour just before Thatcher eviscerated it. In 1994, following the evaporation of the British C.P., Hobsbawm felt freed to examine his own century, publishing “The Age of Extremes, 1914-1991,” whose success can be gauged by its translation into thirty-seven languages. The book is engaging, erudite, and blinkered. Hobsbawm takes seriously the Leninist tenet that no socialist revolution ever occurs without a vanguard party. Accordingly, he holds up the Bolshevik Revolution—the very fact that it happened—as civilization's hope, right through the atrocities. No less troubling is his treatment of the United States: in his account, its administrations never seem to suffer disagreement or cross-purpose—a caricature more monolithic than the one Cold Warriors imposed on the Soviets. In the book's more than six hundred pages, he has little to say about the industrial murder of millions of Jews, while staking out a principled anti-Zionism. Above all, he neither narrates nor explains the century's central story: American supremacy in politics, markets, and mass culture. Hobsbawm acknowledges, in a footnote, that “instead of classifying the economic systems of, say, the USA, South Korea, Austria, Hong Kong, West Germany, and Mexico under the same heading of ‘capitalism,’ it would be perfectly possible to classify them under several.” He further concedes that, in the light of postwar decolonization and transformations in daily life and technology, his overarching framework—the struggle between

“capitalism” and “socialism”—may appear ephemeral. And yet while he brilliantly anatomizes the Soviet collapse, he mourns the passing of the Leninist tyranny, in the name of “the peoples” of the former U.S.S.R. and the world’s poor.

Once, soon after Stalin’s death, Hobsbawm and other members of the C.P. Historians’ Group were invited on a rare pilgrimage to Moscow, where they met some ballerinas but saw little of real life, handicapped by the absence of city maps and telephone directories, not to mention (and he doesn’t) the presence of stooges. “There was not much to be learned about Russia by visiting it in 1954 that could not have been learned outside,” he maintains, adding that he came home “politically unchanged if depressed, and without any desire to go there again.” Hobsbawm always talked himself out of disillusionment. He can now admit his failure to foresee consumerism’s trumping of leftist revolution in his beloved Spain and Italy. He recognizes—it took Peru’s Shining Path—that not every “leftist” movement deserves support. So why his loyalty to the Soviet experiment? Because he was *there*, in 1933 Berlin, because it was the Red Army that “tore the guts out” of the Nazi war machine, because the Soviets furnished a counterweight to the American global empire, because the left “needed something more than social security legislation and rising real wages.” He writes, “We were not liberals. Liberalism was what had failed.” Of his perseverance, Hobsbawm writes in the plural—“The party was what our life was about”—and suggests that he found fraternity, above all, in the postwar community-based Italian C.P. Communism gave him a platform from which to transcend nationalism as well as individual egoism, to be a partisan for humanity. Still, the tenacity of his allegiance might have come down to vanity. “I could prove myself by succeeding as a known communist, and in the middle of the Cold War,” he writes. “I do not defend this form of egoism, but neither can I deny its force. So I stayed.” The fact that you’re the last one left doesn’t mean you have to turn out the light. ♦

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