

John H. Arnold, Matthew Hilton, Jan Rüger,
History after Hobsbawm. Writing the Past for the
Twenty-First Century, Oxford (Oxford University
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Looking back, Eric Hobsbawm in 2008 summarized the general lines of his intellectual project in the following way: »I'm basically a curious or problem-oriented historian who tries to bring fresh perspectives to bear on old discussions by posing new questions and opening up new ways«¹. Although his large and influential body of work never gave rise to anything like a »Hobsbawmism«, to a circle or school around him, his influence has been felt by historians since his writings were first published in the 1960s.

In 2014, a year and a half after Hobsbawm passed away, a conference-homage took place at the University of London, and most of the work published in »History after Hobsbawm« proceeds from this event. The contributions to the volume cover a broad thematic spectrum and a range of time periods. For Hobsbawm the historian (and communist), the practice of history was much more than a recreation of the past; it was a question of commitment to the »now«, to the »how we got here« and of contributing to the question of »where we go next«. All historiographical practice (as Hobsbawm's work essentially is) must be critical and concern the past, but also the present and the future. It is on this basis that the volume's editors have required of their contributors that they tackle the matter of what being a historian *should* mean in their particular fields of study.

Crucial in these contributions are the methodological perspective, the questions dealt with and the specific objects of analysis. But also important is a matter of great importance to the work of historians as intellectuals and citizens who participate in the public sphere of their society: the role that historians must play in understanding our contemporary societies. This matter also brings with it a responsibility, which is to actively refute misrepresentations of the past. Therefore, historians *must* think about the implications of their work within the social and political framework that reads and processes their contributions.

The texts included in the book are structured around the themes that most interested Hobsbawm. These are panoramic views of some recent historiographical themes by historians who have a high reputation in their respective areas of expertise, illustrated, for the most part, with primary research. The editors group contributions into three major blocks: the history of nations and empires; the history of economies; and the history of popular



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¹ Richard J. Evans, Eric Hobsbawm. A Life in History, Oxford 2019, p. 658.

politics (the »history from below« promoted by the group of historians of the Communist Party of Great Britain that Hobsbawm belonged to). All the chapters invite us to understand the past within the present.

The volume's main goal is to discuss the historian's job and offer guidance to its practitioners in the 21st century, and it certainly achieves this. Its pages feature matters that are vital to historiographical practice in the social, political and cultural circumstances of the new century, discussed by researchers who have made substantial contributions to their specific fields of study. However, it is also an express aim of the book to undertake the task of opening perspectives and posing new questions, based on Hobsbawm. Here the volume presents some gaps. Some contributions purposely deal with Hobsbawm's work (this is the case with John Breully's chapter analysing nationalism in Hobsbawm) or the political nature of the historian's job in Hobsbawm (given the attention of Geoff Eley in the chapter that closes the book as its »Conclusion«).

Most of the texts undertake a dialogue with Hobsbawm, whether with his four »Age« volumes², or with his contributions regarding popular protest or the invention of tradition, taking up these matters in order to add nuance to, refute, expand on or demonstrate the insufficiencies of Hobsbawmian interpretations in the new sociohistorical circumstances of our days. Matters of gender (the subject of a number of the book's chapters, by Catherine Hall and by Sonya O. Rose and Sean Brady) and the environment (by Paul Warde) are two examples. However, there are also contributions (most clearly those by Renaud Morieux and Bill Schwarz) which hardly touch on dialogue with the British historian; their chapters seem to be written despite Hobsbawm and could fit into a debate about new historiographical perspectives, but not into a work that was designed as homage to the great historian.

All the book's authors, without exception, are British historians or work at British universities. The Britain-centred perspective of a work based on the legacy of a historian such as Hobsbawm, with his concern for the global, seems excessively narrow. The editors have missed the opportunity to bring together historians from other latitudes, such as Brazil or India, countries where Hobsbawm had great influence, for example in Subaltern Studies and with his contributions on the marginalized, oppressed and forgotten, in short, on those »below«. Incidentally, the book has no index of authors, a lack that is incomprehensible in a collective volume of these characteristics.

The surname Hobsbawm has its origin in an administrative deformation of the original Obstbaum, or »fruit tree«. The book edited by Arnold, Hilton and Rüger is outstanding testimony to the

² Eric John Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution. 1789–1848*, Cleveland 1962 (*The World Histories of Civilization*); id., *The Age of Capital. 1848–1875*, New York 1975 (*History of civilization*); id.; *The Age of Empire. 1875–1914* London 1987; id. *The Age of Extremes. A History of the World, 1914–1991*, New York 1994.



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inspiration of this great British historian's legacy in recent decades,
an inspiration that is still at work today on new generations of
historians.

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