

Lucy Riall

On Eric Hobsbawm
(1917–2012)

This forum concerns the work of Eric Hobsbawm, who died in October 2012 at the age of 95. Hobsbawm's life followed a remarkable international trajectory that embodies in many ways the vicissitudes of the twentieth century. Born in Alexandria in 1917 to Anglo-Austrian-Jewish parents, Hobsbawm spent his childhood in Vienna and his adolescence in Berlin, where he witnessed Hitler's rise to power. Following his family's move to England in 1933, he studied at the University of Cambridge and, in 1947, was offered a job as a History Lecturer at Birkbeck College, University of London. He spent almost his entire academic career at Birkbeck, ultimately becoming the President of the College, but his professional life remained, in his words, «not only peripatetic but multilingual». As one of the first (and self-avowed) «jet set» academics, he also spent long periods of his life away from northern Europe as a visiting professor at universities in Brazil, Mexico and Italy, as well as the USA.¹

As an historian, Hobsbawm writes in his memoir, *Interesting Times*, he had always sought to stand «at a slight angle to the universe».² He had become a Marxist as a young man in Berlin, and joined the British Communist Party after he came to England. Amid widespread controversy, he remained in the Party after the 1956 events in Hungary (most of his closest colleagues left in protest), and he also remained loyal to the principles of Communism even when the magnitude of Stalinist crimes became clear after 1989. At the same time, this «unrepentant communist» who «hated Britain and excused Stalin's genocide» (in the strident words of London's *Daily Mail*),³ became one of the most influential historians of the twentieth century and, in later life, was appointed a Companion of Honour by British prime minister Tony Blair in 1998. Hobsbawm personified the public intellectual

1 E. Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, London 2002, 310.

2 *Ibid.*, 416.

3 A. N. Wilson, «He Hated Britain and Excused Stalin's Genocide. But Was Hero of the BBC and the

Guardian, a TRAITOR too?», in: *The Daily Mail* (2 October 2012), <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2211961/Eric-Hobsbawm-He-hated-Britain-excused-Stalins-genocide-But-traitor-too.html> (accessed 16 July 2013).

who was respected around the world. Hence, Hobsbawm was not so much an outright outsider as someone – as he put it – «who does not wholly belong to where he finds himself ... a polyglot cosmopolitan, an intellectual whose politics and academic work were devoted to the non-intellectual, even ... an anomaly among communists, themselves a minority of political humanity in the countries I have known.» This sense of not belonging, he goes on to say, made his life complicated «but it has been a professional asset for the historian».⁴

These simple facts about Hobsbawm's life, clearly reflected in his historical research and publications, make a discussion of his work especially valuable for the *Journal of Modern European History*. As all the contributors to this forum recognise, reading Hobsbawm today raises some genuine problems. Most of us find it difficult, to say the least, to come to terms with his refusal to denounce the crimes of Stalinism; moreover, his approach to international history seems outdated as he attaches nearly no attention to the fields of cultural and gender history. His unapologetic «Eurocentricity» and failure to deal with critical questions concerning the idea of Europe also makes many of us uneasy these days.

Nevertheless, Hobsbawm's dramatic impact on shifting the focus of history away from high politics to «labouring men», his work on British economic and working-class history and his creation of entirely new fields of research (such as the «social bandits») remain lasting achievements. No less impressive was his ability to broaden the boundaries of history and redefine its protagonists. Moreover, his lifelong commitment to historical synthesis and to communication with a wider public is an inspiration to us all. «Communication is the essence both of teaching and writing», he writes in *Interesting Times*, «[i]t is through class discussion that we establish whether we have actually communicated what we wanted to.» For Hobsbawm, public engagement is what matters, and it provides an antidote to the «unadventurous» and «unchanging» routine of academic life. Experienced from inside, a research seminar may be unforgettable, but seen from the outside «it merely looks like [...] a couple of dozen people in the late afternoon [...] sitting along a table discussing a paper read by one of them or an outside visitor, and then going a couple of hundred yards to a pub for a drink or two. Considered as a potential movie it is not even art-house material».⁵

What follows is a revised version of a workshop dedicated to Eric Hobsbawm, held at the European University Institute, Florence, in March 2013. Of course, as a reflection on Hobsbawm's contribution to historical knowledge, the workshop was far from comprehensive, and it was not our aim to cover all aspects of his long and remarkable career. Instead, we wanted to open up a dialogue, to provoke a discussion, and in particular, to encourage critical reflection on Hobsbawm's legacy. Among the issues that we proposed for debate were: the circulation of historical

4 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 416.

5 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 298, 300–301.

knowledge and the international networks of historians, the relationship between the personal and political life of the historian and his/her intellectual concerns, the role of the historian in present-day society, and the changing position of Europe in historical narratives. We focused especially on Hobsbawm's contributions to the historical understanding of capitalism and communism, imperialism and international relations.

Our three main speakers at the workshop, whose papers are published here, come from different generations and national traditions, and the decision to choose speakers from different backgrounds was made deliberately. Silvio Pons is an Italian historian who works on the Soviet Union and global communism; Jan Rüger is an historian with experiences in Germany as well as the UK who works on Anglo-German relations in the contemporary period; Natasha Wheatley, holding a BA degree from the University of Sydney, is now completing her PhD at Columbia University on the concept of «historic right» to territory in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe. Inspired by the recent wave of biographical and autobiographical writing on historians by historians, we encouraged our speakers to draw on their own professional and personal experiences as historians in their critical engagement with Hobsbawm's work.⁶

Our thanks go to all who attended the workshop for their comments and questions. We also thank Youssef Cassis and Bartolomé Yun for their participation in the workshop and the *Europe and the World Forum* at the EUI for financing the event.

Lucy Riall

European University Institute
Department of History and Civilization
Villa Schifanoia
Via Boccaccio 121
I-50133 Firenze
e-mail: l.riall@bbk.ac.uk

⁶ See, most recently, M. J. Gonzales, *Raymond Carr and the Curiosity of the Fox*, Brighton 2013.