

I owe a debt of gratitude to Eric Hobsbawm. Like many research scholars in the seventies, I was concerned about the complex ways in which a literary text was embedded in its concrete historical moment. As I read the poetry and prose of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century England, I was intrigued by the fact that they often created strangely melancholic landscapes which were crowded with images of ruins in remote forests, haunted castles, lunatic asylums, desolate farms, enraged mobs, bandits, vampires, ghosts and god-cursed wanderers. Traditional literary criticism suggested that the demon-haunted world I sought to understand was nothing more than an attempt by dilettantes, satiated with the calm world of reason, to look for uniquely different ways of experiencing sensations of pleasurable horror. It was only when I came across the work of Eric Hobsbawm on peasant rebellions and urban crowds, I realized that the sepulchral images I was disturbed by possessed experiential meaning and social purpose. They were deliberately used to create fables for a revolutionary and a violent age where social reason and moral imagination had given way to tyranny, sadistic cruelty, hunger and betrayal - nightmare had become an inseparable part of the political and moral economy of the age.

Hobsbawm followed up his influential works (*Primitive Rebels, Industry and Empire, Bandits and Captain Swing*), on the legitimacy of the demands of those people who, for a variety of reasons beyond their control, found themselves on the margins of the agrarian and urban arrangements of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Europe, with three magisterial volumes on the history of the political, material and cultural changes that the world went through from the French Revolution to the First World War (*The Age of Revolution, The Age of Capital and The Age of Empire*). Elegant in his style, graceful in his wit, humane in his judgements and sure of his control over facts and sources, in these volumes Hobsbawm tried to understand the reasons why the nineteenth century, which had begun with the apocalyptic hope of making 'a new heaven and a new earth,' had ended in such grim despair. As he explored the complex ways in which the thoughts, sentiments and moral expectations of the men and women of the nineteenth century were entangled in what they did in their personal, civil and political spaces, he came to share with Dostoevsky the sad

## CAN IT BE TIME TO GO? Hobsbawm's Short History Of The Twentieth Century

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AGE OF EXTREMES: THE SHORT TWENTIETH CENTURY, 1914-1991

by Eric Hobsbawm

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feeling that often the admirable 'fire that burns in the hearts of men' rages out of their control and burns down the civilizations they hope to reform.

The trilogy about the nineteenth century was written by a 'professional remembrancer' - an observer and a recorder of dates, names, thoughts and acts. While doing so, Hobsbawm did not see himself as a dispassionate chronicler. As a historian, he did not identify himself with the gentleman wanderer, in Caspar David Friedrich's famous painting, who stands on a calm mountain slope and watches the turmoil of clouds, wind and the setting sun in the valley below. His moral and political ideals were always alert to the discriminations that had to be made between acts which deserved our sympathetic understanding and those which were reprehensible. Indeed, part of our fascination with these volumes lay in the fact that he always challenged our sense of moral responsibility and invited us to consider with him those things in the past which ought to be cherished as a part of our heritage and those which we should feel ashamed of acknowledging in our recollections of our traditions. As always, Hobsbawm made it clear that the historian's task was not utterly different from that of a moral philosopher or a political scientist - a task which all great historians since Thucydides and Plutarch have always accepted.

Hobsbawm's new history of the twentieth century is written, not from the point of view of someone who can always keep an ironic distance from the events he describes, but by one whose life and choices were influenced by what happened around him. In the writing of *The Age of Extremes*, he sees himself

as 'an open eyed traveller,' - a witness of and a participant in many of the troubled events discussed in the book. That is why the tone of the book is marked by contradictory feelings of a fin de siècle gloom and weariness, as well as by the conviction that as a historian he must preserve, however ephemeral it may be, the sense that it is always possible for us, even in the worst of times, to preserve the 'ideals of justice and humanity' so that we can make the renewed effort to build the societies we desire. It is not surprising, therefore, that he takes up the task of 'remembering' - a task which he undertakes with a great sense of personal commitment because he feels that one of 'the characteristic and eerie phenomena of the late twentieth century' is the loss of historical memory and the erasure of all the social mechanisms that once helped contemporary experience to find its links with the past. He points out that while we are surrounded by signs of the past in the civil spaces within which we conduct our daily affairs - by streets named after public men, war memorials, museums and the daily barrage in the media about treaties and old enmities and historic tasks, etc. - we have actually lost all sense of why things happen and how they all hang together. He recognizes that one reason for amnesia towards the past is that almost every instance in our century has been marked so deeply by the excess, the ignominy and the grief of violence, that each one of us knows that to look back is to gaze into the eyes of the Gorgon and be confronted with hate, revenge and despair. Yet, he adds, to refuse to remember is to give in to the temptation of despair and so invite further disaster.

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offers a brilliant analysis of the history of the 'short' twentieth century - a century which began with the First World War and the Russian Revolution, endured the despondency of an industrial slump and the barbarism of the Second World War. It recovered for a brief while (even as small and vicious wars continued) to see the liberation of former colonies and to enjoy a few decades of economic prosperity, and ended with the collapse of communism and another round of economic misery and ethnic slaughter everywhere. What is immediately obvious is that Hobsbawm wants to distinguish his own historical method from that of Fernand Braudel and the Annales school of historians whose main concerns with the material lives of people over a 'long time' led them to study patterns of slow change, often unnoticed even by the people affected, in agriculture, trade, medicine, building or demography. Hobsbawm, instead, wants to write a 'short' history which is crowded with events and people; where things happen in quick and spasmodic succession; where there are power struggles, wars, revolutions; where new inventions cause decisive changes in the material and cultural lives of people; and where people have ideas, make mistakes, exert egotistical power over victims. What makes his work exciting is that he tries to show that at each moment a complex cluster of ideas, actions and people come together to trigger off changes or cause disasters. Instead of studying a world 'enclosed . . . in stability' (Braudel), he presents one in which something is happening all the time. The only way, therefore, of apprehending a complex reality is to offer exhaustive descriptions of a diverse variety of events, responses and actions taking place at the same instance and then analysing them to see the ways in which they make sense.

In order to write a history which pays attention both to the infinite number of 'poor passing facts' (Robert Lowell's phrase) of the age and to the underlying structure which gives meaning to the details, Hobsbawm divides the entire span of the century into three overlapping parts. The first part of his triptych is made up of the years between 1914 and 1945. These years constitute for him the 'Age of Catastrophe.' They are marked, he says, not only by the sudden and irrevocable disintegration of nearly all the institutional and communally sanctioned ways of organizing

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