MEMOIR, SOCIAL HISTORY AND COMMITMENT: 
ERIC HOBSBAWM’S INTERESTING TIMES

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Social history is today a rather anxious pursuit. By some measures it is the norm for historical research and understanding and the basis on which all serious historians proceed. Its assumptions about the proper subject matter of history—about who and what matters and ought to occupy historians’ attention—and its assertion of the primacy of the “social” and of the need to work “from the bottom up” have been widely accepted and constitute the conventional wisdom of the field. Textbooks almost uniformly reflect the fact that social history defines the dominant way of talking about the past and so, increasingly, do the prescribed curricula for the teaching of history in schools. And if there is a master narrative that governs the telling of modern history, it is social-historical in character.

And yet, practicing social historians know that their privileged position within the discourses of historians is precarious and, put simply, that it rests on a research base that is not expanding. While research students pay homage to social history in a vague manner, their projects are increasingly informed by perspectives that have very different agendas and theoretical foundations. Work on gender and race, for example, can be considered part of social history in a very broad sense, but it is typically embedded in a framework dominated by questions of identity that do not sit comfortably within social history. Those questions, moreover, are often answered with either of two opposing claims that are inconsistent with the guiding assumptions of social history. One asserts the primacy of ethnic, racial or sexual identities over and despite social location; the other insists on the fluidity and constructed character of identities that, again, are not fixed by the social. In either case, the social is less important, less determining than the “cultural,” and “agency” or choice more clearly at work than “structure.” In these and other areas of specialization social history does not appear to be setting the agenda of new scholarship; and it is increasingly regarded as established and perhaps even as ‘old’, with all that designation implies.

That impression is reinforced by the undeniable fact that the most distinguished social historians belonged to a generation whose most luminous figures have either passed from the scene or are approaching that point. Fernand Braudel, Edward Thompson and Lawrence Stone are dead; their contemporaries and collaborators typically retired and heard from less often and less forcefully than before. An exception is Eric Hobsbawm, who at 85 is still at work and who seems as intellectually vigorous today as he was half a century ago when he invented the “crisis of the 17th century” and argued its importance in the pages of the new journal, Past and Present.1 He has just published a memoir, Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life, that is meant to be read alongside his last big book, The Age of Extremes, his history of the “short twentieth century.”2 The appearance of Hobsbawm’s autobiography is a major intellectual event, at least for historians.3 It is first of all a compelling personal story told with grace and wit.4 It is also, and of necessity, a sustained engagement with one of the
big, unanswered questions of the past century: why did some of the most brilliant men and women of the era put themselves at the service of a party and an ideology—communism—that has come in recent years to be understood as not merely wrong but evil and why, as in Hobsbawm’s case, did it take so long to recognize this mistake? Third, Hobsbawm’s life and work offer critical evidence of the link between the practice of history, social history in particular, and politics; and they provide at least anecdotal evidence about the preconditions that facilitated the writing of the kind of synthetic and interpretive history that Hobsbawm helped to define. And last, the book’s publication offers not only an opportunity to reassess Hobsbawm’s impressive oeuvre but also affords a distinct perspective—indeed a guide—from which and with which to do so.

Surely the most remarkable feature of the book is its deft mix of the personal and the social, the contextual, epitomized by the easy slippage between the first and third person, and between the active and passive voice. There are moments of incredible candor, as when he admits to having “virtually no memories of” his English father Leopold, who died in 1929, because “... I have deliberately chosen to forget most of what I might have remembered.” (28) From what he can remember or pick up from others Hobsbawm concludes that “Few people I know have been as unsuited to earning their living in a pitiless world than my father.” He had a “tendency to dream” but very modest ambitions: “Sufficient for the day and perhaps a little over” was his motto—a creed we can assume his son determined not to live by. Hobsbawm’s mother, Nelly, died in July 1931. She was in some respects “conventional in the pre-1914 Viennese sense,” but she was also a translator and a published writer. (38) Hobsbawm later read her only published novel and found it “elegant, lyrical, harmonious” but probably not “of the first class.” Her poems he read earlier and told an aunt he “did not think highly of them.” She was shocked, but Hobsbawm explains that even then he believed “that one should not delude oneself even about the people or things one cared about most in life.” Readers of Hobsbawm’s histories have come to expect this disenchanted, objective, critical stance toward events, persons and movements in the past. To witness it deployed so personally is nevertheless arresting, if also quite admirable, a clear triumph of hard-headed intellect over sentiment. Trauma of this sort “was bound,” as Hobsbawm writes, “to leave deep traces on the lives of two children who passed through it,” and he is sure “that I must bear the emotional scars...somewhere on me. And yet I do not think I was conscious of them as such.” (41) Perhaps he simply buried the memories; perhaps, he suggests, it was “because I lived most of the time at some remove from the real world.” Still, it is not difficult to see the deliberate turn toward objective fact, toward detached, scientific and unromantic explanation as the quintessential response of the deeply intellectual to a life that would surely defeat you if you did not stand up and take the measure of it.

By 1931 this difficult childhood had landed Eric and his sister, Nancy, now orphans, in Berlin, where they were taken in by family. There they lived until the spring of 1933—young Jews adrift in Berlin in the terrible last years of the Weimar Republic and witnessing at first hand the early stages of the Nazi revolution. Eric enrolled in a local Gymnasium and stayed for just over a year and half. The experience nevertheless “left the deepest impression on my life,” (49) for it was from this vantage point that he watched the collapse of Weimar and the Nazi
seizure of power. It was there and then that Hobsbawm joined the Sozialistischer Schülerbund (SSB) and and in effect “became a lifelong communist, or a least a man whose life would lose its nature and significance without the political project to which he committed himself as a schoolboy, even though”—as Hobsbawm openly concedes, “that project has demonstrably failed, and, as I now know, was bound to fail.” (55–6) Hobsbawm is clearly at pains to explain this commitment, for it has been a defining feature of his life, his scholarship, and his friendships; it was crucial to his reputation, his reception and to whatever fame and fortune he later earned. Again, he moves back and forth between the personal and the social and, as he tries to “recover or to discover and reconstruct” this “buried stranger . . . ,” “this remote and unfamiliar child,” he concludes “that, had he lived in other historical circumstances, nobody would have forecast a future of passionate commitment to politics . . . ” (56) But for Hobsbawm an apolitical identity was “unthinkable . . . ,” for “in the crisis-saturated atmosphere of Berlin in 1931–33 . . . political innocence was impossible.” (57) “German nationalism . . . was not an option for an Engländer and a Jew . . . What was there left but the Communists . . . ?” (58)

If political options were limited in Berlin in 1933, that was not the case in Britain, where Hobsbawm moved in the spring of that year. He nevertheless stuck with his initial political choice in these vastly different circumstances. He did not, however, do much about it and instead lived mainly in the world of books: this period of “ultra-intellectualization” was mainly due to his aunt and uncle, “who flatly refused to allow their impassioned sixteen-year-old to plunge into the life of political militancy which filled his mind.” (81) This enforced turn to academics was presumably what made possible Hobsbawm’s admission to King’s College, Cambridge, and, in the long run, his distinguished academic career. But, as Interesting Times makes absolutely clear, Hobsbawm the historian was premised upon Hobsbawm the communist. Hobsbawm’s politics provided his inspiration and his intellectual framework; and it provided privileged if atypical entry to the distinct worlds he inhabited and from which he extracted those quirky but brilliant insights and those odd but always apposite nuggets of information that have so distinguished his writing. The world communist movement, and Hobsbawm’s attachment to it, was quite literally the precondition of his history.

The connection was there even when formal political activity was not an option, as had been the case prior to university and would be again during the war, when his politics apparently precluded a more exciting assignment. But the twin commitments remained harnessed together and perhaps even strengthened one another. While at school in London, for example, Hobsbawm “read about everything, rapidly, voraciously and with endless curiosity.” (96) And as he processed this growing body of information he gave it “a Marxist, that is to say an essentially historical, interpretation.” The easy movement from “Marxist” to “historical” is especially notable, for it implies an identity that for many would be controversial but which for him is assumed. This unproblematic identification of Hobsbawm’s twin commitments has remained more or less undisturbed for his entire adult life. Indeed, in his lengthy discussion of life as a historian Hobsbawm simply assumes that making history more social, in his view more Marxist, was also making it more modern and professional. He understands the arguments about history in the postwar era to have been essentially a contest in which
“historical traditionalists were fighting a rearguard engagement in a losing battle against the advancing modernists in most western countries where history flourished freely.” (290) In this struggle he belonged clearly to the modernist camp and regarded his type of history, social history, not merely as modern but as the “common flag for the homogeneous popular front of the innovators.” (290) Hobsbawm apparently needed no variant of neomarxism, no self-consciously interdisciplinary methodology, to justify or guide his work. It was self-evidently modern, professional, social-historical—and, incidentally, Marxist—but it could be all these things in a fashion that required no elaborate theoretical apparatus.

The assertion of this identity—modern, professional, social-historical, Marxist—becomes still more interesting when one considers that Hobsbawm’s “Marxism was, and still to some extent remains, that acquired from . . . ‘the classics’ published . . . under the auspices of the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow.” (96) This is not a postwar “Western Marxism” where the tenets of orthodoxy were mixed up with fragments of the young Marx on alienation and musings on culture and daily life by the Frankfurt School or Lukacs or French existentialists which, as Hobsbawm asserts, “never crossed the Channel until the 1950s.” (96) It is something more elementary, if nevertheless powerful; and this rather straightforward materialism served not only to organize the understanding of history, or of economic history more specifically, but also as the means by which “to understand the arts . . . ” and “the place and nature of the artist and the arts (in fact, literature) in society . . . ”—issues on which Hobsbawm has written with truly penetrating insight. (97)

Hobsbawm’s intellectual progress as a historian thus did not come into conflict with his politics, at least for a very long time. As he admits, the Cold War did not interfere seriously with history or historiography and in no way slowed the advance of the modernists. It might have limited his career prospects, particularly in the United States and, it seems, even at Cambridge, where he did not get a permanent position despite many connections. Nor does Hobsbawm appear to have chafed under the more obvious constraints of being in the party, although these did lead him to avoid issues in contemporary history, at least until later in his career. But as Hobsbawm concedes, he also profited from the notoriety of being a committed communist and a distinguished historian. His reputation was further enhanced during the 1960s and after by the upsurge of interest in the sort of work he had long done. “Being Communist”—the title of chapter 9—thus did not really get in the way of his life “Among the Historians”—chapter 17.

How easily the two vocations could coexist and how fruitful their combination could be was evident from the very moment Hobsbawm went up to Cambridge in 1936. There he would join the broadly-based Socialist Club and also the student branch of the Communist Party and he would spend summers working with James Klugman for the party’s student organization, the World Student Assembly, in Paris. In Paris he met communists from all over the world, and while there he saw on full display the powerful, if temporary, mobilizing power of the Popular Front—a lesson he never forgot and one he tried later, but unsuccessfully, to teach Tony Benn and the left of the British Labour Party.7 It was as a leftwing student that Hobsbawm first adopted what would become his “habitual role of ‘participant observer’ or kibitzer,” from which he would witness so many of the great events and major players of mid-century. (226) Again and again,
Hobsbawm would get his introduction to a particular country, its people and its history, through party-based contacts. A student travel grant got him to North Africa in 1938 where he would meet the leader of the Algerian Communist Party, and he came close to doing a major research project on “The Agrarian Problem in French North Africa.” Later, Hobsbawm would visit and come to know Italy largely under the auspices of the PCI—to which he eventually felt more attached than to the British party—and it was Ambrogio Donini, a member of its Central Committee, who led him to some of the strange sects who populate the pages of Primitve Rebels. Another tough party operator, Michele Sala, first showed him around Sicily. Hobsbawm stumbled across other primitive rebels, or what looked like them, as a lone student tourist to Spain just after the outbreak of civil war. He doesn’t remember quite why he did not consider “joining up with the forces of the Republic in the war against fascism,” but admits he was there to observe rather than to fight. He would return later to observe more closely, but Franco’s triumph precluded the easy fraternizing with local reds. Hobsbawm’s links with Latin America were also more varied: he had family in Chile and had also been introduced to Hortensia Allende and escorted her around Cambridge. By the time he visited in person, he also had an academic reputation that opened doors to people who were not in the party. Still, he spontaneously sought out comrades, and his stance on Latin America was very close to theirs: he had the “old instinct to be on the side of any insurrectionaries and guerillas who talked the language of the left . . . ” and he was sympathetic to, and fascinated by, local, indigenous cultures and traditions. But he had little time for the ultraleft insurrectionaries and their utopian dreams—a stance that put him very close to the policies of the established communist parties in the region. On visiting Cuba, he notes wryly, he was called upon to translate for Che Guevara who, though “as fine a figure of a man as . . . on the famous photo,” “said nothing of interest.” (256) The assessment is pure Hobsbawm—keenly aware of the man’s physical appearance, unimpressed by his mind—as is the fact that he was again right there, in the middle of things, observing carefully while participating merely—but can it ever be merely—as an interlocutor.

Despite the inhibitions and strictures of the Cold War, Hobsbawm would also get the opportunity to mingle with local communists in the United States, though not until 1960. Then he came to know America through academic friends, through comrades, and through jazz. Hobsbawm had developed a passion for jazz in the thirties and was for a time, under the pseudonym Francis Newton, jazz critic for the New Statesman. In the US he sought out people who knew and wrote about jazz and through them musicians themselves, and he claims that jazz was “the key that opened the door to most of what I know about the realities of the USA . . . ” (81) Just what jazz taught him about the country is not made entirely clear, but the lure of jazz certainly got him out of the university and into the big cities—San Francisco, Chicago and New York especially. Hobsbawm is somewhat clearer about what he learned from his comrades. Through his academic sponsor, the Marxist economist Paul Baran, he got to know the leftwing leader of the long-shoreman’s union Harry Bridges. Hobsbawm regarded him “with admiration and emotion” and was clearly impressed by the man’s toughness as well as his politics. Longshoremen rank with teamsters in the lore of hard-nosed trade unionists and Hobsbawm preferred their leader’s politics. But Bridges
and the ILWU had a further attraction, for they operated effectively both as trade unionists and in the world of politics and they could more than hold their own with the mobsters with whom they came into regular contact in and around the ports. Bridges would defend Jimmy Hoffa as “a stand-up guy” who skimmed “from the bosses, not the workers,” and explained to his English visitor the rules of engagement with gangsters who, it turns out, had less clout politically than did the union and who were rather less wealthy than is often assumed. These insights, Hobsbawm tells us, “gave me a real introduction to American politics.” (392–394)

Unlike so many other tortured souls, and so many communists or former communists, Hobsbawm had no apparent difficulty in combining politics, academics and social life and felt little or no tension in these distinct roles. Thus he became “one of the leading Cambridge undergraduate communists,” came to edit the undergraduate weekly Granta, and in the end “got a starred first in the Tripos,” earning him a postgraduate studentship. (124) Hobsbawm was also elected to the Cambridge “Apostles,” that famous, secret, self-selected band of brilliant young men who have played such a prominent part in British intellectual life. (187–190) Despite these achievements and diversions, Hobsbawm claims that “The Party was, of course, my primary passion.” (113) It even trumped other passions for, as Hobsbawm admits, the party had a role to play in personal relationships. “To have a serious relationship with someone who was not in the Party or prepared to join . . . was unthinkable,” he admits. (135) His first wife had thus rejoined the party when they married in 1943. Later on, in the 1960s, Hobsbawm would read it as a sign of his growing estrangement from the party that he did not worry over whether his second wife, Marlene, was or was not a communist. Loyalty to the party also trumped more local loyalties. Hobsbawm admits to knowing several of the famous Cambridge spies, more often through their connection with the Apostles than with the party, but did not know then that they were spies. Nevertheless, he frankly admits that people in his position knew “such work was going on, we knew we were not supposed to ask questions about it, we respected those who did it, and most of us—certainly I—would have taken it on ourselves, if asked.” (102) Being a devoted communist, being a historian, and being Eric Hobsbawm were part of the same project, the same life, the same emerging and obviously complex but remarkably untroubled identity.

It is no news, of course, to learn that Hobsbawm was a Marxist and a party member longer than most. But surely it is unexpected to learn just how central politics remained throughout Hobsbawm’s life and how it coexisted with, and even nurtured, his development as an historian. The association prompts two obvious questions. First, given his enormous achievements as a scholar, in what ways did his communism contribute? Relatedly, in what ways might it have impeded or inhibited his work? The answers to these questions should also throw at least an indirect light on how Hobsbawm—and, presumably, others with similar backgrounds and commitments—views the experience of being a communist and having lived the 20th century with such a strong attachment to what turned out not only to be a losing cause but a movement whose momentary successes brought so much pain and human misery. Put simply, Hobsbawm’s uniquely paired identities provide a unique opportunity to weigh up the costs and benefits of his choices and preferences.
Perhaps the clearest answers can be provided to the first question, for they are so fully on display in Hobsbawm's work as well as in his autobiography. Hobsbawm's Marxism gave him a perspective on everything, a totalizing framework with which to understand the evolution of the modern world. He transparently enriched that framework with his own judgements, but the big structure within which he worked was inherited from Marx and Marxism, and Hobsbawm continued to make interpretive sense of the world without departing from that basic approach. Witness, for example, his major synthetic project: the triptych on the long 19th century and his masterful survey of the short 20th century, The Age of Extremes. The overriding question of the 19th-century volumes was the rise of the bourgeoisie, its impact on society and economy and culture and the establishment of bourgeois democracy, with its evident virtues and limitations. The set-up is quite orthodox, even if the execution is brilliantly iconoclastic, at least in detail. The more recent volume likewise remains focused on issues that are not fundamentally new—the difficult progress of liberal capitalism, the failed challenge of socialism and the surprisingly powerful, if more momentary, threat from fascism—and the organising principle is the division of the era according to the long swings of capitalist development: the age of catastrophe that corresponds to the great crisis of capitalism between the wars; the "golden age" of capitalism in the quarter century after the war; and the renewed period of crisis and transformation since the end of the long boom in the early 1970s.

The centrality of Marxism to Hobsbawm's work suggests a broader point about the role of synthesis and theory in social history. If social history has a distinctive method, it is local, detailed and fixed on ordinary people and everyday life. If it has a set of working assumptions, they are, first, that society is a whole in which the social, the economic, the cultural and the political are all linked; and second, that what happens at the bottom is as critical as what happens at the upper reaches of society. These assumptions are in a very basic sense in conflict with the methods of social history, for there is simply no way to pile up information gleaned from an investigation of history "from the bottom up" and turn it into a history of society as a whole. The link has to come from theory, which bridges the contradiction at the heart of social history. For Hobsbawm, and for so many others, the theory and the bridge is found in Marxism, and it is frankly difficult to imagine a more suitable and powerful theoretical tool. The theoretical tools at use in more recent work centered on identity, for example, seek to pry apart the connections to whose existence social historians are necessarily committed and so cannot really substitute for Marxism. Is there an alternative? Perhaps, but it is not as yet visible, at least to those of us who have thought of ourselves as social historians for the past generation or so.

Hobsbawm's communism, then, might well be regarded as the essential precondition for writing the sort of integrated, synthetic work that made his name. But at what price? Here the answers are more elusive, for it requires speculating about how a scholar whose background and commitments and prejudices somehow combined brilliantly could have been more brilliant still. This type of counterfactual—and Hobsbawm sagely warns about counterfactual reasoning in general—is particularly dangerous, for it is premised on the possibility of someone retaining all that is useful from holding a particular view of the world while
also not holding it. Nonetheless, Hobsbawm himself acknowledges the possibility of at least a different choice of subjects had he a less firm attachment to the party. He “became essentially a nineteenth-century history because . . . , given the strong official Party and Soviet views about the twentieth century, one could not write about anything later than 1917 without the likelihood of being denounced as a political heretic.” (291) Hobsbawm would, it seems, have turned to the 20th century sooner if he did not feel constrained to avoid open confrontation with the record of communism, both in opposition and in power. Is it perhaps also likely that his eventual treatment of the twentieth century would have been different, and better, if he and the movement to which he devoted himself had rather less to be defensive about?

Again, it is difficult to be confident in judging such issues, for whatever understanding might be gained from a different stance might well entail losses that would make the whole less compelling. Still, there are two very obvious and very big topics on which a different politics would presumably have produced a slightly different shading—the historic role and long-term impact of Soviet communism is the one; the assessment of the opposing role of American capitalism and U.S. power is the other. On neither subject, it could be argued, is Hobsbawm at his very best. In the *Age of Extremes*, the discussion of the failure of socialism and the brutalities of the Soviet system is frank and honest, but marked as well by a deep regret and nostalgia that soften, and to this extent undermine, his otherwise firm assessment. The same mixture marks those sections of the autobiography that deal with the Soviet Union and the “actually existing socialisms” of Eastern Europe. He claims that by the late 1940s and early 1950s people like him “did not remain in the Communist Party because we had many illusions about the USSR . . . ”, even if they “clearly underestimated the horrors of what had gone on in the USSR under Stalin.” (193-4) Nor was he at all reassured by his disheartening visit to the Soviet Union in the winter of 1954–55. And yet, right alongside these passages about the highly unattractive character of the Soviet system is a section in which Hobsbawm recalls that “To most of the world, it [the USSR] did not seem to be the worst of all possible regimes, but an ally in the fight for emancipation from western imperialism, old and new, and a model for non-European economic and social development.” (195) Hobsbawm clearly sympathizes with this view, even at some distance, and cannot quite come to terms with the possibility that a regime which oppressed its own people the way the Soviet system did could not or should not serve as a useful model for others. Instead, he moves from defending the USSR itself—“The Soviet Union,” he says at one point, “. . . made it harder and harder” (191)—to defending its role in international politics and in the global balance of forces.

This is in fact a rather weak defense and it is not properly elaborated and tested either in his history or his autobiography. Nor is his argument that it was the “crusading global anticommunism” of the west that made him refuse to break with the Soviet Union. The argument seems to be that it was the rhetorical excesses of the opponents of communism that pushed him to rally to the cause. (180, 191, 201, etc.) He and his comrades thus “swallowed our doubts and reservations and defended it.” (195) The emotion is understandable, but the logic is not entirely compelling: he concedes now and claims to have perceived at the time that the critics were largely right, but he refused to acknowledge
this because they argued their case so forcefully and intensely. Undoubtedly the Cold War raised the decibel level of political debate, but would a subtler tone have produced a more considered reaction? It seems doubtful.

Hobsbawm’s resistance to drawing the logical conclusion from what he knew to be true is still more evident, and possibly less defensible, in the case of Eastern Europe. His background there gave him an unusually detailed knowledge of the governments put in place in the region after the war and he knew their flaws—and some of their victims—intimately. Nevertheless, he goes back and forth on the character of these regimes. Particularly notable is his treatment of east Germany: it was, he grants, at once “a monstrous all-embracing bureaucracy;” nevertheless, he proceeds, the “new society they were building was not a bad society . . . ” (150) And while its citizens “were not free,” he compares it not to the Soviet Union, with which it did of course differ marginally, but rather more benignly to “a system of superior authority, as [might be exercised] by strict nineteenth-century parents on recalcitrant or at least unwilling minors.” (151)

Hobsbawm also avoids a full reckoning with the consequences of Soviet domination of the world communist movement for those outside the Soviet bloc. He says little or nothing about how the Soviet experience brought socialism and social reform into broad disrepute in the world beyond the reach of the Red Army. That discrediting had very deleterious effects, for it undoubtedly impeded the development and implementation of policies that might have limited the workings of the free market and done rather more for those who did poorly out of it. On the contrary, he asserts repeatedly that it was the threat posed by socialism, the Soviet Union in particular, that forced capitalism to reform itself after the Second World War. Indeed, as he sees it, the enduring contribution of the Soviet Union, for as long as it lasted, was “that it should be a counterweight to the USA and by its very existence frighten the rich and the rulers of the world into taking some notice of the needs of the poor . . . ” Perhaps, but the existence of communist parties that at various moments made it their objective to destroy their rivals on the left or center-left and to weaken social democrats in particular and who, at least on occasion, put loyalty to the Soviet Union ahead of other goals, must surely have diminished the prospects of the broader left within the advanced countries where the objective possibilities for social reform would otherwise have been greatest. Hobsbawm’s views are rather contradictory on these issues. On the one hand, he repeatedly makes it clear that his politics are those of the popular front and that he—rightly, in my opinion—regards the popular front as the most successful strategy ever adopted by communists. But he is also quite dismissive, contemptuous almost, of those other “lefts” who, alongside more liberal and centrist parties, would have to make up any meaningful popular front. He appears to share the traditional CP antipathy to “reformist social democrats” across Europe and to various Trotskyist formations. For Hobsbawm and “for Marxists [more broadly], ‘the Party’ . . . was the only game in town.” He even quotes Isaac Deutscher telling him in the aftermath of 1956, “Whatever you do, don’t leave the Communist Party. I let myself be expelled in 1932 and have regretted it ever since.” (202)

Hobsbawm was also, and still is, very skeptical of the claims and the pretensions of what was to become the “new left.” Describing the fallout from the crisis of 1956, for example, he concludes that “In practical terms these ‘New Lefts’,
although intellectually productive, were negligible." (211) His take on the New Left in general is, as Perry Anderson observes, "dyspeptic" and he seems almost embarrassed by some of its and his enthusiasms. Thus he appears to regret in particular being roped into supporting a "hare-brained project" for a Parisian coffee house in Soho, dreamed up by Raphael Samuel. It was apparently the sort of silly thing that the hard-headed Hobsbawm usually avoided. Hobsbawm is also not at all reluctant to dissect the personalities and describe the faults of heroes of the New Left. Thus Edward Thompson—"brilliant, handsome, passionate"—was in Hobsbawm's quite well-informed judgement "a man showered by the fairies at birth with all possible gifts but two. Nature had omitted to provide him with an in-built sub-editor and an in-built compass. And, with all his warmth, charm, humor and rage, it left him in some ways insecure and vulnerable." (214, 215) The assessment is likely very close to the mark, but slightly harsh, and there is certainly a hint of self-justification in the rather casual conclusion "that Edward suffered bitterly from the failure of the 1956 'New Left'," as if the alternative response adopted by Hobsbawm was more appropriate and productive. Does he really mean to argue that it was better to remain in the party after 1956? He does not quite say so, and in fact says that from 1956 "Party membership no longer meant to me what it had since 1933." (216) But Hobsbawm, who was chair of the Communist Party Historians' Group at the time, did choose to stay and in staying he inevitably opted out of the process of critical reflection on the communist experience that could only have proceeded outside.

Whether the "New Left" failed and led "nowhere much" politically is not, of course, the issue. Indeed, Hobsbawm himself concedes that the New Left brought down both DeGaulle and Lyndon Johnson—an impressive measure of real-world success. He is even more forceful in arguing for the long-term importance of the cultural and social changes brought about in the 1960s: "What has really transformed the western world is the cultural revolution of the 1960s." (261) The issue is whether Hobsbawm's political attachments somehow lessened his ability to provide an adequate account of the fate of both the communist and the non-communist left, inside and outside the Soviet sphere of influence, and hence of the political evolution of the world of which communism was so prominent a part.

A similar question can presumably be asked about Hobsbawm's judgement of capitalism, its Anglo-American or American variant in particular. A recent reassessment of The Age of Extremes points to the absence of a sustained treatment of the United States as a major lacuna and contrasts the unusual imbalance between the substantial and realistic discussion of the failure of socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and the fact that "there is no head-on treatment of the US at all."13 In his memoir Hobsbawm tries to some extent to redress this imbalance and actually ends the book with a discussion of the United States. But its tone betrays a deep ambivalence that cannot help but affect his historical assessment, for good or ill. Indeed, he begins as if defending his previous neglect by saying that "America did not have to be discovered: it was part of our existence." (386) The implication seems to be that because the influence of the US was ubiquitous, it did not require separate treatment. But shouldn't a force so powerful have registered more fully in the analytical framework? This issue Hobsbawm does not discuss, but he goes on—after describing his travels
and contacts in the U.S.—to complain that America somehow requires not only that you recognize its wealth and power but that you be for or against it. "It substituted,” he explains, ‘the question ‘Are you with the USA?’ for the question ‘What do you think of the USA?’ What is more, no other country expects or asks such a question about itself." (403) This is an odd lapse for a Party member for roughly sixty years who presumably heard more than a few political opponents, and many former allies, denounced as enemies not only of the Soviet Union but of the “people” more generally.

Hobsbawm is clearly reluctant to concede the achievements of the American model. Frustrated and resentful, he declares “... how irrelevant, even absurd, is this insistence on approval!” But he seems unable to resist the demand and in the end admits that “... the United States was by any standards the success story among twentieth-century states.” He proceeds further to quote his own prose to the effect that “in some ways the United States represent the best of the twentieth century.” (404) That very sentence, however, comes from an interview published in Italian in 1999 and not, until now, available to English-language readers. There is apparently no English equivalent available, despite the evidently massive character of Hobsbawm’s work and the prominence of the United States in the era he has most recently chosen to write about. And—at least significantly—Hobsbawm will not let this admission stand as the last word on the subject, for he concludes his last chapter by arguing, not unreasonably, that “America is less of a coherent and therefore exportable social and political model of a liberal capitalist democracy, based on universal principles of individual freedom, than its patriotic ideology and constitution suggest.” (409–410) He goes still further in the final “Coda” to the memoir, where he expresses shock at America’s response to September 11th and the “sheer effrontery” of its effort to project US power under the guise of fighting terrorism. Hobsbawm manages to end his autobiography on a slightly more reflective note, but to the very end his troubled relationship to the United States is in evidence.

How much does this matter in evaluating the history Hobsbawm has written? No clear and unambiguous answer is available and opinions will inevitably differ. Still, it can at least be suggested, as Perry Anderson has done, that a history of the 20th century that so privileges one contender for global dominance and so marginalizes “the winner” risks missing, or at least underestimating, certain crucial features that shaped the course and influenced the outcome of the contest. On the other hand, it is worth recalling that Hobsbawm’s work as a whole reaches back further in time and encompasses a wider range of experience than that of his most recent book. More important, the reach of all his work is incredibly extensive both in time and space and it is distinguished above all by its ability to link the distinct domains of human history—economy, society, politics, culture and belief and artistic expression—in an unusually productive and insightful fashion. Hobsbawm’s account of his life makes a very strong, if indirect, case that none of this would have been possible without the unique interpretive framework provided by his politics and without the incredibly global vantage point that a politics of worldwide transformation demanded. But no achievement comes without a price. Hobsbawm’s strengths were made possible by a perspective with undisguised preferences and antipathies. If those preferences are today increasingly rare, we must accept that comparable achievements might also
become increasingly rare. Whether that comes to be regarded as an advance or a regrettable loss will be determined by what new visions more contemporary commitments and dispositions make possible. Those are not the subject of this essay; and they are in any case probably unknowable until their consequences are more visible. Looking back, however, it seems undeniable that the era of totalizing and interconnected social history epitomized by Hobsbawm's work was premised on a politics and a set of intellectual assumptions that have passed. The future of social history, whatever it will be, will be different.

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ENDNOTES


3. Appropriately, the book has been widely and critically reviewed. For an overall assessment by a former colleague, see Roy Foster, Irish Times (October 26, 2002).


8. Perry Anderson, "Confronting Defeat," complains that over the course of the four volumes the bourgeoisie itself gets lost and no other actor replaces it in the historical drama. Perhaps, but if so maybe it is a testament to Hobsbawm's recognition of the growing complexity of the advanced societies.

9. Elsewhere Hobsbawm is very clear on historians' responsibility to enter public debate and to use their knowledge to debunk myths and combat the lies about the past that empower contemporary demagogues. See, for example, his lecture to students at the Central European University in Budapest, reprinted as "Outside and Inside History," in Hobsbawm, On History (New York, 1997), 1–9.

10. Hobsbawm is careful to reference the work of Charles Maier, Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany (Princeton, 1997) as a basis for understanding the DDR. But the sympathy and the ambivalence are of a piece with his overall view of the Soviet Union and the hopes it inspired.

11. This particular quotation—Interesting Times, 279—ends with a question mark, but there is no question it is his view.
12. In discussing his emotional attachment to the communist movement Hobsbawm makes much of having joined before the era of the “popular front,” which began in 1935, and belonging therefore “to the generation tied by an almost unbreakable umbilical cord to hope of the world revolution, and of its original home, the October Revolution . . . ” (218). There is no reason to doubt this, but it might well be useful to add that it was the experience of the great worldwide mobilization against fascism that, for many even of Hobsbawm’s cohort, gave the attachment to the left a firmer moral grounding and a sense that it might actually prevail.

13. Anderson, “Confronting Defeat,” 13. Anderson also notes the relative neglect of the enormous economic growth that has occurred in Asia over the period since 1945 and especially since the end of the “golden age,” and of the simultaneous advance in the status of women and the steady spread of democracy. Presumably the absences are connected and spring from a reluctance to acknowledge the economic and social dynamism of capitalism.