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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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 varietyof 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 historyof 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 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 ofthe 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 phenomenons 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.

In *The Age of Extremes*, Hobsbawm 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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human affairs inherited from the past, but also by a lunatic increase in deliberate brutality. Thus, on the one hand, a majority of human beings, after seven or eight millenniums of historical culture, ceased to live by growing food or herding animals. Further, a radical transformation in the systems of transport and communication almost erased, at least in most of Europe and the United States, the old cultural differences between the urban and the rural areas. One of the most obvious indications of the changes that took place in the fabric of everyday life was that it became virtually impossible for most of the major creative talents of the age to think in pastoral terms without inviting the charge of sentimental falsification or reactionary pathos. Writers, of course, continued to evoke landscapes of memory and desire, but a majority of those who wanted to engage with the reality of the world they inhabited understood that they needed idioms, tones, images and colours which were different from those which George Eliot or Tolstoy, Tchaikovsky or Ravel, Cézanne or Monet had employed. An accurate rendering of the structures of experience in a radically transformed age demanded fractured rhythms (as in the poems Eliot and Pound), ruptured novelistic forms (as in Joyce, Celine or Kafka), fragmented or tortured pictorial images (as in the works of Picasso, Klee, Dali or Kokoshcha), and difficult musical harmonies (as in the compositions of Schoenberg, Weber or Ives).

The changes in the patterns of daily life after 1914, caused by the new modes of agricultural and industrial production, were difficult enough for people, but the really catastrophic aspects of the decades that followed were the genocidal days that began with the First World War. The wars fought during the hundred years before 1914 were short skirmishes in comparison with what happened in the thirty-one years which followed. Nineteenth-century wars were limited and generally fought according to some acceptable rules - or at least people thought that there were or ought to be such rules. They were, of course, like all wars brutal, but to most observers they did not seem to threaten the conditions of civilized life. It was possible for Jane Austen to write during the Napoleonic wars and, apart from describing handsome soldiers on parade, not to mention the wars in her novels. Similarly, George Eliot could remain seemingly oblivious to the wars of Empire. Those who did discuss violent revolutions and wars did so in ethical terms of justice and humanity (except, perhaps, for Clausewitz). There was outrage when the generally accepted conventions about the conduct of warfare were violated and unarmed civilians or undefended cities were attacked. Thus, General Sherman found himself in a morally indefensible position when in the name of military strategy, he ordered the burning of Atlanta during the American Civil War, and General Gordon's hapless last stand against the Mahdi produced countless adventure yarns (never mind, for the moment, the politics of these wars - as well as the shameless massacre of the native Indians in America and the utterly immoral colonial adventures throughout the nineteenth century). Indeed, it is almost impossible to think of a work written after 1914 which is as full of righteous indignation at the killings of civilians by armed soldiers as Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, or outrage at the attacks on ordinary citizens by revolutionary zealots as in Conrad's *The Secret Agent* or Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*.

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Wars and revolutions after 1914 were qualitatively different. They were not only more savage, but were also paradoxically, more rationally organized than ever before. The technological means of mass destruction made available at the beginning of the First World War required efficient management and the direct involvement of the largest sections of the civilian populations in the production, maintenance and functioning of the war machinery. 1914 thus inaugurated a century of total war which destroyed incredible quantities of products and consumed the energies of everyone - bureaucrats, contractors, engineers, scientists, warrior intellectuals and an incalculable number of skilled and unskilled workers including women (indeed, the First World War produced a revolution in the employment of women outside the household in Europe and America). Hobsbawm gives some amazing statistics to show how war, technology and business had become intermeshed. By the end of the First World War, France was producing 200,000 shells a day. During the Second World War, the United States army ordered 519 million pairs of socks and 219 million pairs of pants, whereas the German army ordered 4.4 million pairs of scissors and 6.2 million stamp pads for its military offices. It is not surprising, as Hobsbawm notes, that civilian populations, being an intimate part of the new military and industrial complex, became legitimate targets of attack.

The real paradox of the years of 'penal peace' that followed the end of the First World War is that they were ruinous for both the victors and the defeated, and resulted in the destruction of a Europe with which people had become familiar over the previous hundred years. A genocidal war, in which there were no great civil or moral principles involved, gave way to a brutalized and opportunistic politics of self-interest and power. The Treaty of Versailles parcelled out the Habsburg and the Ottoman Empires into small ethnic and linguistic states (a disastrous notion for which the world is still paying a bitter price) and imposed heavy burdens on Germany in an attempt to keep it weak. While many who survived their experiences in the battlefield became staunch opponents of all wars, there were a large number of others who continued to be fascinated with a life of blood, sacrifice, guns and masculine power, and waited for a chance to take fierce revenge against those who had humiliated them. The longing to strike back amongst the defeated increased, when those who had won refused to take the necessary steps to reintegrate the losers into an economically stable and well-organized Europe. It is not surprising, therefore, that a belligerent nationalist like Hitler could appeal to a mass of resentful little men of all classes with his pathological rhetoric of ethnic purity, glory, tradition, will, religion and armed power. What gave his runic chant of these words greater emotional charge was that the 1920s and 1930s had also resulted in the weakening of the Allied powers. England began to lose its grip over its colonies, France was politically exhausted, America was caught up in a 'system endangering' economic crisis and the Soviet Union was in the midst of a ghastly war against its own citizens under the direction of a savage dictator.

Hobsbawm's description of Europe in the aftermath of the war is in many ways exemplary in its clarity. He draws fine and subtle distinctions between various right-wing reactionary convictions (Churchill was after all a conservative and a colonialist but not a Nazi), and brushes aside mythic explanations of Nazism as a conspiracy of monopoly capital against labour movements and democracies (industry sides with those who enable it to function smoothly and make profit). But, unfortunately, he also adds to the mystification of the left and, when it comes to concerns outside of Europe, settles for the most conventional explanations. Thus, in the face of massive evidence to the contrary, he declares that the threat to liberal democracies in the inter-war periods came 'exclusively from the right,' and that the Marxist movements were unquestionably committed to liberal and open societies. In order to sustain his claim, he offers a fragmentary discussion of the Spanish Civil War without considering the evidence against the communists by people like Orwell, Simone Weil and others, and by completely ignoring the testimony of countless people who were disgusted with Stalin's blood-thirsty utopia, the Hobbesian calculation involved in the Soviet-German pact and the loyal support extended to Russia's gulag politics by nearly all the communist parties (many of whom did not even support the elementary right to life of poets like Mandelstam or Akhmatova). Further, Hobsbawm's treatment of the anti-colonialist movements of the period, which in many ways sustained the principles of humane and enlightened societies in our century, is perfunctory and careless. In a few brief sentences, for example, he talks of Gandhi as a Hindu spiritualist who used 'passivity' as a revolutionary force. Hobsbawm is so hypnotized by Europe that he fails to see that Gandhi's call to freedom may have helped nourish the idea of a political society, with its related concerns for justice and equality, during the long years of catastrophe in Europe. Indeed, I would like to assert that it was amongst people who were outside the moral economies of Europe and the U.S. that the thought, the desire and the hope of freedom and human rights were kept alive - Gandhi was perhaps amongst the greatest of

those who wanted to see freedom become a part of the realms of action and speech. (There were, of course, others besides him - liberal thinkers in Nazi Germany, black writers in racist America, novelists, poets and painters in Latin America, none of whom find a mention in the section on the cultural history of the period between 1914 and 1945.)

The second part of Hobsbawm's triptych, concerned primarily with the European decades which began after the Second World War and came to an end in the 1970s, is entitled 'The Golden Age'. Hobsbawm is aware of the irony in his classification, yet he is also full of surprise and admiration for all the decisive achievements and changes that occurred in Europe against all expectations soon after the disasters of the war. The decades, he thinks, acquire a lustre if one examines them from the point of view of someone who has seen Europe in rubbles, and of someone who is now saddened by Europe's present disarray and decline. The year 1945, he asserts, inaugurated 'an era of secular boom' in which Europe gained in economic confidence, brought about a series of revolutionary social changes and completely changed its cultural maps. He realizes that the golden age was not homogeneous and that it was created under the threat of a nuclear holocaust and at a cost to human beings and the environment which was often too high. Yet, the 'seismic changes' of the era did hold out, for the first time in human history, the possibility of eradicating hunger, freeing people from crippling labour, giving education to the majority of children and providing security for the aged.

In retrospect, it seems to Hobsbawm that, before the troubles of the seventies and the eighties, people, in the West at least, lived through 'thirty glorious years.' More and more people began to believe that prosperity was no longer a dream. The scale of the changes that took place was so astonishing that a life of luxury, which only the very rich could once enjoy, became the expected standard of comfort for every citizen. Hobsbawm's statistics and itemization of things which define the period are revelatory: the yield of grain per hectare doubled; the catch of fish trebled; cheese and butter were produced in such surplus that they had to be dumped into the sea; most households acquired fridges, transistors, televisions, record players, telephones, cars and washing machines; travel for relaxation and pleasure became, like the grand tour of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a part of the experience of most people; and the majority of the population ceased to grow food and live in villages. While many of these changes were a result of the most esoteric of researches in science and technology (Hobsbawm's chapter on modern physics and engineering is one of the most lucid and sensible ones I have read), they were also sustained by genuine structural changes in the social arrangements in many European countries and in the U.S. Capitalism had absorbed the lessons of the slump and of retaliatory politics. Germany and Italy, who had lost the war, were not only integrated into the European Union, but were provided with massive aid for reconstruction under the Marshall Plan. Further, most of the capitalist countries tried to ensure that there was a safety net provided by state-sponsored welfare and social security schemes to save people from becoming helpless victims of ill-health, economic fluctuations, misfortune and old age.

The irony, however, of the age of gold was two-fold. It came into existence under conditions of extreme tension between different nations and ideologies, and its success depended upon the ability of its 'golden' warriors from 'golden' cities to inflict enormous amounts of suffering on people who lay outside their spheres of influence. In retrospect, it seems as if the Cold War was absurd, and that the Americans and the Soviets were engaged in a shadowy contest whose real heroes can now be found only in the fictional thrillers of Ian Fleming or le Carré. Hobsbawm may be right in suggesting that to a European or an American looking back after the fall of the Russian empire, the apocalyptic tone of the Cold War seems like the bluster of a cheap devil in a bad drama. Unfortunately, however, its impact was disastrous, both on the internal politics of the two belligerent powers and on a world that found itself dependent on them. America used the bogey of communism with its characteristic insincerity, cynicism and viciousness to deal with internal dissent (Joe McCarthy may have been an 'insignificant demagogue,' but he was nasty enough to have ruined many respectable lives; and the 'golden' boys of American democracy used the fear of communism to unleash dogs on school-going children, intensify the dereliction of the ghettoes, refuse fair wages to Chicano workers, shoot students protesting against war crimes etc.), as well as, effectively, destroy for decades the possibility of forming reasonably democratic governments in places inhabited by people they thought were economically, physically and racially inferior (the following list of countries should have a 'mantric' quality to dispel the golden haze that Hobsbawm casts over the decades since 1947 - Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Timor, Afghanistan, Suez, Palestine, Iran, Iraq, Congo, Uganda, Angola, Ethiopia, South Africa, Rhodesia, Cuba, Honduras, Haiti, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Paraguay. . .).

The counter player in the insane nuclear game, the Soviet Union, used it to justify the nightmare traps it laid for its citizens and to bludgeon Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Rumania, Poland and Albania into submission. For twenty-five years the two warriors burnished with gold filled the world with quantities of arms which were beyond belief. Indeed, as Hobsbawm acknowledges, the Cold War provided the rich countries with enormous quantities of 'trade in death'; it made good business and good social sense, for it provided jobs to millions of army men, bureaucrats, industrialists, contractors, engineers, scientists, financiers, skilled and unskilled workers and intellectuals. Given that Hobsbawm is aware of all this, I am surprised that he still persists in dismissing the Cold War as a side show of the age of gold. Considering the fact that his historical enterprise is utterly serious, I would have imagined that he would have found it difficult to find words which were derisive enough to describe the age.

What disturbs me more about Hobsbawm's emplotment of the historically important events of the period is that, amidst all the wealth of detail he provides, there is very little space left to notice the lives spent by most of us in the poorer regions of Asia, Africa and Latin America. China gets noticed because Mao's grotesqueries of the 1960s are luridly visible (though the scandal of his invasion of Tibet does not seem to merit inclusion). But the scant attention which Hobsbawm pays to others who are beyond the gaze of Europe reminds me of a surrealist map I once saw in which Paris is so large that it pushes the rest of the world into oblivion. The indifference, the ignorance, the silence of Hobsbawm's history of the non-European world is so profound that it seems as if none of us who live elsewhere have, for a whole century, had a thought, a hope, an ambition, a deed, a word or an idea which is worthy of remembrance.

The third part of Hobsbawm's triptych has to do with the collapse of the age of secular miracles. He calls the period between 1970 and 1990 'The Landslide.' It is a period of economic gloom and of the breakdown of seemingly strong and stable civil societies into tribal or ethnic fragments. The evident failure of different ideological states over the past two decades to sustain the institutions of a responsible civil society, combined with the obvious corruption of those entrusted with the task of providing basic security to the citizens, has resulted in the strengthening of a politics based on exclusive identities and self-determination. Hobsbawm very rightly mocks such politics and demonstrates its 'sad and tragic absurdity.' The politics either of identity, ethnicity or religious purity is a mark of 'intellectual nullity' and thrives on hysteria. Its combination of xenophobic, holistic fantasies and polymorphous emotionalism provides the 'humus' in which bigotry, self-righteousness, intolerance, paranoia and murder grow. Unfortunately, it is precisely the irrationalism of identity politics which has caught the fancy of large numbers of people across the world. The result has been that the last two decades have seen more military action and guerrilla wars than people could have imagined was possible a few decades ago. Though given the criminalization of such politics and its links with the international arms bazaar, it is not always 'clear who is fighting whom and why'. Thus, none of us are sure about the tribal or religious factions at furious war with each other in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Kashmir, Punjab, Sri Lanka or elsewhere. All we are certain about is that a few armed thugs, who have neither a vision of a good society nor the means of constructing one, have the ability and the desire to destroy at will.

The only bright spot of the last two decades is the final realization that the secular religion called 'communism' was not only fatal but also vacuous. One no longer has to carry the Marxist intellectual burden of demanding that good societies must be socially responsible towards their citizens but need not be free. The notions of social responsibility and freedom are ideas that must also be remembered as one confronts, at the end of the century, a mafia capitalism that is seeking to spread its tentacles everywhere.

Hobsbawm, however, does not see much hope for change - he is sure that the cries and follies of our century will continue into the next millennium.

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