

# Living history

## John Crace of *The Guardian* interviewed Professor Eric Hobsbawm to mark his 90th birthday and his five years as Birkbeck's President

It's a fair bet that most people who reach the age of 90 will have had their moments. But Eric Hobsbawm – despite his insistence that he's had no more excitement in his life “than a Victorian vicar” – has had more than his fair share. As one of the most respected historians of the second-half of the twentieth century, he hasn't just chronicled events, he's lived them too. He was on his way home from school in Berlin when Hitler came to power, he translated for Che Guevara in Havana, he saw Stalin's corpse and ... and these are only a few of the more notable highlights.

His globe-trotting has understandably slowed down over the past decade or so and these days you're much more likely to find Hobsbawm at his Hampstead home than on the political frontline; but his academic output remains formidable. Only this summer he published his latest collection of essays, *Globalism, Democracy and Terrorism*, and he has no plans to stop there.

“One of the benefits of being a historian is there's no limitation on age,” he smiles. “In fact being old is almost an advantage as you have a lifetime of study and experience behind you. Inevitably there are some things I can't do; for instance, I don't have the energy to embark on a new area of study. But I can – and will – revisit my old material to bring it up to date.”

There's a sense in which the outside world often expects the great and the good to re-evaluate their work on landmark birthdays – as if the mere achievement of longevity confers a wisdom and insight denied to others. Yet Hobsbawm maintains that his desire to re-evaluate his work has nothing to do with being 90. “It stems from wanting to reflect what has happened in the world,” he says. “There have been some enormous changes – especially in the past 30 years – and they need to be taken into account.”

For many historians, the notion that events didn't pan out in quite the way they hoped or expected comes as a nearfatal, narcissistic wound. But Hobsbawm has always been something of a one-off. While most other left-wing historians had abandoned their Marxist credentials after the Soviet suppression of the 1956 Budapest uprising, Hobsbawm retained his Communist Party membership and – even now that he has disavowed much of what was done in the name of revolution – he is still identified primarily as a Marxist historian.

There's a curious dialectic at work here. For though Hobsbawm resented being trapped by other academics as the spokesman for the Marxist ghetto, the fact that he was gave him a status and recognition – not to mention book sales – it might have been otherwise hard to achieve. It's taken a while for Hobsbawm to reconcile himself to this contradiction, but he's now relatively sanguine about it.

“One of the goals of history is to explain how humanity got from the caveman to where we are now,” he says, “and Marx was one of the first people to understand this and to try and build a theory around it. He was also interested in the history and thought of the unknown and the dispossessed in society – those who had been ignored by previous generations of historians.

“So it’s fair to say my methods were inspired by Marx, and to that end I am still a Marxist historian. I see no need to disclaim this. A Marxist approach, with some modifications – Marx didn’t pay enough attention to the importance of culture in shaping society – remains the best way of understanding history.” And there’s been plenty that he has revised – not least his attitude to the Soviet regime for which he has long been more of a critic than apologist – and there’s still more that he plans to put right. Even his great tetralogy, *The Age of Revolution*, *The Age of Capital*, *The Age of Empire* and *The Age of Extremes*, for which Hobsbawm will always be best known, does not escape self-criticism. “I think I underplayed the importance of the USA in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,” he says. “I rather took it for granted and should have made it more explicit. So, if I have the time, I’ll definitely go back to this.”

Despite this willingness to admit to his own mistakes, Hobsbawm argues passionately that these misjudgments have not affected his writing. “Yes, I got some things wrong in my personal political life,” he says, “but I defy anyone to read my work and show that these errors affected my work. I would have written the same book regardless of my own opinions and beliefs.” Even so, the personal and the political have always been closely interlinked in Hobsbawm’s own life.

Although born in Alexandria in 1917, he grew up principally in Vienna and Berlin, where he was looked after by relatives after both his parents died by the time he was 14. “It would have been hard not to have been radicalised at the time,” he points out. “It was obvious to everyone that the centre ground under the Weimar Republic was collapsing and that things were going to change.

“Joining the nationalists on the right was never an option. As a British person I was always going to be excluded and as a Jew I wasn’t going to join an anti-Semitic organisation. So, I suppose it was inevitable I was attracted to the left and became a member of the Communist Party. “In hindsight, it must have been dangerous to have opposed the Nazi party so directly in its first months of power, but at the time it just felt tremendously exciting. Change was coming and, with the optimism of youth, I believed it would be a revolution from the left.”

Hobsbawm moved to England before the war and went to King’s College, Cambridge where he also became a member of the famous Cambridge Apostles – a secret debating society of intellectuals, that had included Guy Burgess and Anthony Blunt who were later exposed as KGB spies. Not that the Soviets ever made any overtures to Hobsbawm – “I guess I was too well-known as a Communist to suit their purposes,” he laughs.

His war years were almost wholly uneventful. “Having lived in Germany and also being a Communist Party member must have made me a double threat to British national security,” he shrugs, “as I wasn’t allowed to go near any interesting action. So I was kept out of the way educating soldiers.”

Life picked up – albeit slowly – once the war was over. He became a lecturer in history at Birkbeck in 1947, but his outspoken left-wing politics made many other institutions rather nervous of him at a time when the Cold War was at its iciest. While Hobsbawm built an academic reputation by journal articles and conferences, his failure to get any books published before *Primitive Rebels*, his ground-breaking work on millenarianism in 1959, was entirely due to a covert censorship.

In many ways, then, it would have been far easier – and far more beneficial to his career – if Hobsbawm had followed the example of so many others and left the Communist Party in

1956. So why didn't he? Hobsbawm says he was under no illusions about the Soviet regime but felt tied by an unbreakable umbilical cord to the hope of world revolution. Here the personal and the political almost certainly overlap. After all, how much harder must it have been for a Jewish person who had been present at the birth of Nazism to renounce his beliefs than for those whose politics were largely based on theory?

Hobsbawm's gradual transformation from academic outsider to establishment grandee – among the many awards he has collected is a Companion of Honour in 1998 – began in the 1960s as his scholarship achieved recognition above his politics. But there's also no denying that – while remaining firmly encamped on the left – his politics did become noticeably less hardline, a process he describes as being more of a realisation that things weren't going to happen in the way he hoped, than a drift towards the centre with age.

“There comes a time when you have to accept the reality,” he says. “It was obvious by the 1960s that there wasn't going to be a Marxist revolution from below in the West, so I never fell for the apocalyptic rhetoric coming out of Paris in 1968 nor gave any political credence to terror groups, such as the Baader- Meinhof gang. I may still have felt some kind of emotional attachment to the idea of the anti-establishment rebel, but I never thought they were going to change anything.”

As the 1970s morphed into the 1980s, all sorts of other unthinkable became thinkable. “For the first time ever, I came to believe it would be better if a Marxist revolution didn't succeed,” he explains, “I had spent some time in South America and I thought it would be better for Peru if Shining Path didn't gain power.” Likewise, Hobsbawm found himself marked out as one of the architects of New Labour as he helped Neil Kinnock kick-start the transformation of the Labour party. “It was clear that the old Labour party had become unelectable and that change was inevitable,” he says. “Not that I'm necessarily pleased with the way it turned out, mind. If John Smith had lived then things might have been different ... Tony Blair has been a massive disappointment. I'm more hopeful about Gordon Brown, though. At least I understand where he's coming from.”

It's this desire to understand – combined with a willingness to acknowledge change – that has always been one of Hobsbawm's defining hallmarks. There's no virtue in consistency if you're consistently wrong, and the only real requirement of an academic is the ability to be receptive to new ideas and events and to try and make sense of them. And that's one of the reasons why Hobsbawm has been so intractably opposed to the Iraq war. “I just don't understand it,” he shakes his head. “I mean, I can just about see what Blair was up to, even if I don't approve. He's got a Messiah complex and wants to save the world. But I can't for the life of me see why the US went to war. It had everything it wanted and needed in terms of political and economic hegemony without doing so, and it has now put that at risk. The only explanation must be that the divisions within US society must be deeper now than at any point since the Civil War.”

How will it all end up, then? “It's not a historian's job to make predictions,” he says. But if he had to make a guess? “It's possible things may stabilise in the short to mid term over the next 20–30 years, but the long-term outlook is bleak. Crises, such as global warming, can only be tackled at a global level and global decision making always seems to come second to state interests.”

It's a bleak outlook, but Hobsbawm has no real regrets. “I would have hoped we would have been better at saving the world,” he says, “but regrets are a waste of time. I've lived longer

and been more successful than I ever expected, so I suppose I should be happy with that. Besides, there's always the possibility of being surprised ...".

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