

## *Eric Hobsbawm: The Last of the Universal Historians?\**

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There is more than one reason why the historians, and the Italian historians in particular, must feel deeply grateful towards Richard Evans for his painstakingly researched and engagingly written life of Eric Hobsbawm.

According to a famous dictum by Edward Carr, before studying a historian's works, we would do well to study the historian himself.<sup>1</sup> Until today, when confronted with this task in the case of Hobsbawm, we had to rely on a mass of very uneven critical literature exclusively based on his copious published writings.<sup>2</sup> For the rest, we had to be satisfied with Hobsbawm's own autobiography, *Interesting Times*: a remarkable book on its own right indeed, in composing which, on the other hand, the author had deliberately restricted himself to what he defined the 'personal-political' dimension, to the almost complete exclusion of his more intimate and private *Erlebnisse*.<sup>3</sup>

Professor Evans' full-length and all-round biography draws on the vast amount of papers left by Hobsbawm (among which the more than six hundred pages of the manuscript diary he intermittently kept, mostly in German, from 1934 to 1951) in order to cast light on his 'inner life' and 'personal views, feelings and experiences' too, and provides therefore an indispensable new tool for applying Carr's injunction to one among the most globally influential historians of our times.<sup>4</sup>

Italy is among the countries where, since the early 1960s, Hobsbawm's books have been more regularly translated (and in a few cases originally published) and have enjoyed a relatively vast popularity among academics, university students, politicised and educated readers.<sup>5</sup> All the same, we should be careful not to take it for granted that the present generation of Italian students and younger researchers are fully aware of

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<sup>1</sup> EDWARD H. CARR, *What Is History?*, The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures, delivered at the University of Cambridge, January-March 1961 (New York, Vintage Books, 1962), 26, 54.

<sup>2</sup> The invaluable EMILE CHABAL, ed., *The Eric Hobsbawm Bibliography*, <https://www.hobsbawm.shca.ed.ac.uk/>, also contains a short, not altogether satisfactory section of selected critical and biographical writings on Hobsbawm's life and work, see section 'Appraising Hobsbawm,' <https://www.hobsbawm.shca.ed.ac.uk/category/appraising-hobsbawm>.

<sup>3</sup> ERIC HOBSBAWM, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), xiv.

<sup>4</sup> RICHARD J. EVANS, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Live in History* (London: Little, Brown, 2019), electronic ed., 8, 439.

<sup>5</sup> ANNA MARIA RAO, 'Transizioni: Hobsbawm nella modernistica italiana,' *Studi Storici* 54, no. 4 (2013): 761–90; ANNA DI QUAL, *Eric J. Hobsbawm tra marxismo britannico e comunismo italiano* (Venice: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2020).

the ground-breaking and long-lasting impact he made on an astonishing variety of disciplinary fields, international research trends and scholarly as well as ideological controversies.

Hobsbawm was a protagonist in the renewal of British labour history after 1945.<sup>6</sup> He sparked the debates on the general crisis of the seventeenth century and the effects of the first industrial revolution upon the standard of living of the English people.<sup>7</sup> He pioneered the study of the ‘pre-political’ forms of action, thinking and mobilization of the subaltern classes and the social history of jazz.<sup>8</sup> He composed a now classical four-volume history of the ‘long nineteenth’ and ‘short twentieth’ centuries.<sup>9</sup> He explored previously neglected aspects of the history of Marxism.<sup>10</sup> He launched or contributed to launch the ongoing vogues of the ‘invention of tradition’ and ‘nations and nationalism’ studies<sup>11</sup>. He was involved in the acrimonious post-Cold War disputes about the meaning of the Soviet and Communist experience and the state of the world after its collapse.<sup>12</sup>

But what I would like to emphasise today is that, even beyond all the achievements I’ve just listed, Hobsbawm played a central and in some respect unique role in the general development of professional historiography during the second half of the twentieth century. Through the paradigmatic example given with his empirical researches and the hypotheses advanced in his more generalising essays, his frequent interventions in methodological discussions,<sup>13</sup> his leading involvement in the workings of the key institutions of the discipline (scientific journals, societies and conferences, university teaching, publishing initiatives etc.), Hobsbawm established himself, in the decades after World War II, as one of the chief followers and promoters of the ‘historiographical revolution’ started in the interwar period by the *Annales* and their British counterparts and allies grouped around the *Economic History Review* and the

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<sup>6</sup> ERIC HOBSBAWM, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964).

<sup>7</sup> ERIC HOBSBAWM, ‘The General Crisis of the European Economy in the Seventeenth Century,’ *Past and Present* 5, no. 1 (1954): 33–53; HOBSBAWM, ‘The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century – II,’ *Past and Present* 6, no. 1 (1954): 44–65; HOBSBAWM, ‘The British Standard of Living, 1790–1950,’ *The Economic History Review* new series, 10, no. 1 (1957): 46–68.

<sup>8</sup> ERIC HOBSBAWM, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959), 2; HOBSBAWM [Francis Newton, pseud.], *The Jazz Scene* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1959); HOBSBAWM and GEORGE RUDÉ, *Captain Swing* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1969); HOBSBAWM, *Bandits* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969).

<sup>9</sup> ERIC HOBSBAWM, *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789–1848* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962); HOBSBAWM, *The Age of Capital, 1848–1875* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975); HOBSBAWM, *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987); HOBSBAWM, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> ERIC HOBSBAWM, *How to Change the World: Marx and Marxism, 1840–2011* (London: Little, Brown, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> ERIC HOBSBAWM and TERENCE RANGER, eds, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); HOBSBAWM, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> HOBSBAWM, *The Age of Extremes*; HOBSBAWM, *Intervista sul nuovo secolo*, with Antonio Polito (Bari, Laterza, 1999); HOBSBAWM, *Globalisation, Democracy and Terrorism* (London: Little, Brown, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> ERIC HOBSBAWM, *On History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1997).

London School of Economics and Political Science (among whom Michael Postan, Hobsbawm's much-admired academic mentor at Cambridge in the second half of the 1930s).<sup>14</sup>

The economic and social historians operating on the northern side of the English Channel after the Great War had aimed to emancipate history from its traditional identification with the 'past politics.' They proposed to transform its study in an *histoire intégrale* engaged in a cross-fertilization with the social sciences and open to the contribution of Marxism, provided that Marxism was employed as a canon of historical interpretation rather than an empirically unfalsifiable and ideologically motivated general theory of society enslaved to party interests.<sup>15</sup>

Hobsbawm took part in the process of thematic, conceptual and methodological reorientation advocated by his senior colleagues as an exponent of a new generation of middle and lower middle class Marxist professional intellectuals who had converted to revolutionary Communism in the Red Decade in response to the Great Depression, the rise of Hitler to power and what they were disposed to regard as the success of Stalin's Soviet Union in giving birth to a 'new civilization' and in providing a bulwark against the rising tide of fascist barbarism.<sup>16</sup>

Recent research in the newly born field of the transnational and transcultural 'history of history' suggests that this peculiar 'Marxism of intellectuals,' as Hobsbawm himself termed it, contributed very significantly to the globalization of contemporary historiographical trends. In several extra-European countries the very beginnings of a modern tradition of scientific historiography sometimes coincided with the reception and adaptation of a variety of Marxist models.<sup>17</sup> In Western Europe, and especially in Britain, the Marxist professional historians belonging to Hobsbawm's generation cooperated to the enlargement of disciplinary horizons envisaged by the *Annales* School under an umbrella paradigm capable of gathering together a much wider range of scientific approaches and ethical and political stands (from the New Left to Hugh Trevor-Roper's moderate conservatism).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> EVANS, *Eric Hobsbawm*, 99–102; PETER BURKE, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929–89* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

<sup>15</sup> TEODORO TAGLIAFERRI, *La nuova storiografia britannica e lo sviluppo del welfarismo: Ricerche su R. H. Tawney* (Naples: Liguori, 2000), 251–309.

<sup>16</sup> BEATRICE WEBB and SIDNEY WEBB, *Soviet Communism: A New Civilization?*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, 1935); TEODORO TAGLIAFERRI, 'Storia scientifica' e reinterpretazione della Guerra Civile inglese nella prima produzione di Christopher Hill (1938–1957) (Dissertation in History of Historiography, University of Naples Federico II, a.y. 1992–93), 82–187, 238–258.

<sup>17</sup> ERIC HOBSBAWM, 'Gli intellettuali e l'antifascismo,' in *Storia del marxismo*, 4 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 1978–82), III - *Il marxismo nell'età della Terza Internazionale*, tome II, *Dalla crisi del '29 al XX Congresso*, 443–92, see 475; DANIEL R. WOLF, *A Global History of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); DANIEL R. WOLF, ed., *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, 5 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011–12), V - *Historical Writing since 1945*, eds AXEL SCHNEIDER and DANIEL R. WOLF, *passim*.

<sup>18</sup> CRISTOPHER HILL, RODNEY H. HILTON, and ERIC HOBSBAWM, 'Past and Present: Origins and Early Years,' *Past and Present* 100 (1983): 3–14; HUGH R. TREVOR-ROPER, 'Fernand Braudel, the *Annales*, and the Mediterranean,' *The Journal of Modern History* 44, no. 4 (1972): 468–79.

As rightly underlined by Professor Evans in the conclusion of his book, Hobsbawm's individual 'contribution to the rise of the so called [...] societal history cannot be divorced' from a series of 'collective' experiences he shared with various networks of 'colleagues, comrades and friends.'<sup>19</sup> The first decade of his career coincided in particular with his membership to the Historians' Group of the Communist Party of Great Britain.<sup>20</sup> The Group disintegrated after the vast majority of them (not including Hobsbawm and other key-figures like the older Maurice Dobb and Arthur Leslie Morton)<sup>21</sup> left the Party in 1956. But their collaboration survived the disruption of the Group thanks, above all, to the broader forum provided by *Past and Present*, the *Journal of Scientific History* that some members of the Group had conceived and launched in 1952 as the meeting ground for a sort of 'popular front of historians' uniting Marxist and non-Marxist scholars.<sup>22</sup>

Both before and after 1956, then, in loose alliance with other schools of innovators, Hobsbawm and the British Marxist historians were at the forefront of the efforts to bring into the purview of the discipline those aspects of the economic, social, political and cultural past, and those actors of historical change, which their predecessors had, in their opinion, unduly neglected. The Marxist historians devoted much energies to device both the categories and the technical tools which were necessary to make these innovations feasible in terms of their conformity to the empirical and evidential rules of professional historiography. What characterised as more specifically Marxist or Marxist-inspired Hobsbawm's and his comrades' (or former comrades') participation in the historiographical revolution of the twentieth century was, above all, their determination to overturn the conventional elitist bias of academic historiography, by 'returning agency' to the popular masses and by reinstating the people's struggles at the very centre of historical change. At the same time, they put a strong emphasis on the interconnectedness and mutual interaction between the class conflicts, the political dynamics and upheavals, the cultural, religious and intellectual movements related to the historical protagonism of the common people.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, and this is especially evident in the case of Hobsbawm, whose homonymous *Past and Present* articles started the still ongoing and expanding General

<sup>19</sup> EVANS, *Eric Hobsbawm*, 470, quoting and subscribing to Hobsbawm's self-assessment in 2008. See ERIC HOBSBAWM, 'Geschichtswissenschaft: Impulse für Menschen, nicht nur Fußnoten,' in GERHARD BOTZ, HUBERT CHRISTIAN EHALT, ERIC HOBSBAWM, JÜRGEN KOCKA, ERNST WANGERMANN, *Geschichte: Möglichkeit für Erkenntnis und Gestaltung der Welt: Zu Leben und Werk von Eric J. Hobsbawm*, Vorträge im Wiener Rathaus anlässlich der Verleihung der Ehrenbürgerschaft der Stadt Wien an Eric J. Hobsbawm am 22 Januar 2008 (Wien: Picus Verlag, 2008), 69–78.

<sup>20</sup> ERIC HOBSBAWM, 'The Historians' Group of the Communist Party,' in *Rebels and Their Causes: Essays in Honour of A. L. Morton*, ed. MAURICE CORNFORTH (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978), 21–48.

<sup>21</sup> The authors of two foundational texts of the Group – ARTHUR L. MORTON'S *A People History of England* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1938), and MAURICE DOBB'S *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 1946).

<sup>22</sup> JAMES OBELKEVICH, 'Past and Present: Marxisme et histoire en Grande-Bretagne depuis la guerre,' *Le débat* 17, décembre 1981: 89–111, see 91.

<sup>23</sup> HARVEY J. KAYE, *The British Marxist Historians: An Introductory Analysis* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984); CHRISTOPHER A. BAYLY, 'Ashin Das Gupta,' *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 43, no. 1 (2000): 14–17, see 16.

Crisis debate,<sup>24</sup> Marxism was a major source of inspiration and encouragement to macro-historical generalization in a period of increasing specialization, providing a key-component to the background of the post-Cold War revival of world history.<sup>25</sup> This last circumstance risks being obscured by the predominant ‘Eurocentrism’ of Hobsbawm’s approach to global history rightly underlined by Professor Evans.<sup>26</sup> It is therefore not out of place to observe that, when we read Christopher Bayly’s first venture in the field of global history, his book on the rise of the Second British Empire, which was written in the second half of the 1980s, we come across the notion of a ‘general crisis’ that upset the entire chain of great Islamic empires extending from the Maghreb to Indonesia, and prepared the ground for the advent of European domination in India and elsewhere. What Bayly was overtly attempting to do here was to transpose and adapt to a hemispherical scale a thesis that had been tested on a pan-European scale for more than three decades in the discussions about the transition from feudalism to capitalism in order to highlight a parallel and analogous dynamics of change in the early modern societies of the Eurasian Orient. One of the reasons which can explain the world-wide resonance of the work of Hobsbawm and the Anglo-Marxist professional historians is that they elaborated conceptual tools which proved particularly well-suited, at least at an initial stage, to the needs of those of their colleagues who were beginning to try to ‘return agency’ to non-European actors too.<sup>27</sup>

A further important peculiarity of Hobsbawm’s involvement in the historiographical revolution appears more directly linked to the passionate ethical and political commitment which ultimately was at the root of all his other methodological options. I’m alluding to his sensitiveness to the need of communicating specialised historical knowledge beyond the borders of the scientific community and exploring ways of presenting the past that could actually reach a much wider public of ‘lay’ or ‘general readers.’<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> GEOFFREY PARKER and LESLEY M. SMITH, eds, *The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2005); GEOFFREY PARKER, *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century*, abridged and revised ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017).

<sup>25</sup> JÜRGEN OSTERHAMMEL, ‘World History’, in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, V - *Historical Writing since 1945*, eds SCHNEIDER and WOOLF, 93–112.

<sup>26</sup> EVANS, *Eric Hobsbawm*, 345. It is important to observe, however, that in his last years Hobsbawm sympathised with Christopher Bayly’s attempt to overcome the Eurocentrism of the classical Marxist approach to world history by giving prominence to the ‘interactive’ character of the global modernization. See Hobsbawm’s noteworthy ‘Préface’ to CHRISTOPHER A. BAYLY, *La naissance du monde moderne (1780–1914)* (Paris: Les Éditions de L’Atelier, 2006), 9–14, see 13–14, and TEODORO TAGLIAFERRI, ‘Bayly’s Imperial Way to World History,’ in *From the History of the Empire to World History: The Historiographical Itinerary of Christopher A. Bayly*, eds MAURIZIO GRIFFO and TEODORO TAGLIAFERRI (Naples: FedOA Press, 2019), 69–114, see 81, 88, 89.

<sup>27</sup> CHRISTOPHER A. BAYLY, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (London: Longman, 1989), 24, 61. For further examples of Bayly’s tendency to adopt Marxist or Marxistisant categories and terms at this stage in his research itinerary, see TEODORO TAGLIAFERRI, ‘Christopher Bayly e “the return of universal history,”’ in TAGLIAFERRI, *La persistenza della storia universale. Studi sulla professione di storico* (Rome: Bordeaux, 2017), 13–72, see 53, note 96.

<sup>28</sup> EVANS, *Eric Hobsbawm*, 293, 342; HUGH R. TREVOR-ROPER, *History: Professional and Lay*, An Inaugural Lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 12 November 1957 (Oxford: Clarendon Press,

For Hobsbawm and the British Marxist professional historians, the education of the people, the ‘real maker’ of history,<sup>29</sup> to a form of active, militant, non-subaltern citizenship, was part and parcel, indeed the very purpose of scientific historiography. In striving for a *nouvelle histoire* dressed in the left-wing garb of a people’s history, they imagined to reconcile a refashioned academic professionalism with their previous existential decision to live the life of the Marxist intellectual longing for the unity of theory and praxis. The resulting tension between the sincere adherence to the professional code and the introjected imperatives of ideology constitutes a *Leitmotiv* in Hobsbawm’s biography, as exactly diagnosed by Professor Evans: ‘Throughout his career as an historian, Eric was pulled one way by his Communist and, more broadly, his Marxist commitment, and another by his respect for the facts, the documentary records and the findings and arguments of other historians whose work he acknowledged and respected.’<sup>30</sup>

In 1978 Hobsbawm himself testified that at no time the readiness of the members of the Historians’ Group to spontaneously adopt the stern attitude of Bolshevik ‘cadres’ was more apparent than in the course of the debates they held, at the beginning of the Cold War, about the social meaning of the English Revolution of the seventeenth century. The British Communist Party, in an attempt to legitimise its opposition to the Labour Government which was implementing the Welfare State, decided to celebrate as a major political event the tercentenary of the abolition of the ‘feudal-absolutist’ monarchy in 1649, which the Group, in an official statement published in the party press, duly interpreted as the highpoint of the necessarily revolutionary leap forward of English society to capitalism.<sup>31</sup>

The risk of succumbing to what a ferocious critic, Hugh Trevor-Roper, branded, not altogether unfairly, as a ‘Procrustean’ handling of historical evidence, which contradicted the norms of their *métier* and stiffened their historical materialism into an *a priori* dogma, was obviously much higher when the Communist professional historians were engaged in the self-imposed task of creating a body of Marxist works specifically ‘written for the people.’ This short-lived experiment in “‘popular” historical writing’ aimed at countervailing the sedating influence of the history that the people learned at school and at emphasising the presence, continuity and centrality in English national history of a ‘non-gradualist tradition’ to which the Communists would have been the most faithful heirs.<sup>32</sup>

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1957). Hobsbawm figures prominently in PETER J. BECK’s *Presenting History: Past and Present* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 69–90, as a case study illustrative of the Marxist ‘presenter of the past.’

<sup>29</sup> CHRISTOPHER HILL, ‘Marxism and History,’ *The Modern Quarterly*, new series 3 (1948): 52–64, see 59.

<sup>30</sup> EVANS, *Eric Hobsbawm*, 389.

<sup>31</sup> The sixteenth–seventeenth Century Section of the Historians’ Group of the C. P. G. B., ‘State and Revolution in Tudor and Stuart England,’ *Communist Review* July 1948: 207–14; HOBSBAWM, *The Historians’ Group*, 30–31. See DAVID PARKER, ed., *Ideology, Absolutism and the English Revolution: Debates of the British Communist Historians, 1940–1956* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2008).

<sup>32</sup> HUGH R. TREVOR-ROPER, ‘Marxism and the Study of History,’ *Problems of Communism* 5, no. 5 (1956): 36–42, see 40–41; ALLAN L. MERSON, *The Writing of Marxist History*, *Communist Review* July 1949: 592–597, see 593, 596; HOBSBAWM, *The Historians’ Group*, 43 (quoting Christopher Hill).

This particular kind of historiographical literature is well exemplified by Christopher Hill's famous 1940 essay on *The English Revolution*, which was reissued in second edition in 1949, or by *The Good Old Cause*, a collection of documents, also published in the year of the tercentenary, in which Hill selectively used and commented extracts from contemporary sources to buttress his thesis that the Civil War had been the English 'bourgeois revolution,' providing an easy target for polemical attacks by academic reviewers.<sup>33</sup>

Hobsbawm was fully involved in the most ambitious and ultimately unsuccessful collective attempt realised by the Group to give birth to a historiography that could be at once scientific and 'popular.' *The Good Old Cause* was part of a series of sourcebooks published under the title 'History in the Making' and the general editorship of Dona Torr (one of the most influential member of the Group). In 1948 Hobsbawm contributed to the Series the short volume relating to the founding of the modern British labour movement in the last two decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup>

This relatively minor episode goes strangely unmentioned in Professor Evans' book.<sup>35</sup> But its significance, in my view, lies in the fact that, according to Hobsbawm's own later testimony, the relative fiasco of the 'History in the Making Series' and some other similar editorial ventures made the Marxist professional historians fully aware of the absence of the very first condition for the take-off of their historiographical project, namely a sympathetic readership recruited among the ranks of politicised trade-unionists and the Workers' Educational Association, owing to the 'declining radicalism of the British people after 1950.'<sup>36</sup>

From the beginning of the following decade, the Anglo-Marxist academic historians devoted therefore a growing portion of their energies to disseminate their views within the ranks of their professional community. Their most important common initiative was the foundation of *Past and Present* in 1952. The experience of this review reveals that, under the latitudinarian definition of the historian's task outlined by Hobsbawm and his colleagues in the introduction to its first issue, the tension between professionalism and Marxist commitment could well result in the refashioning of Marxism into a heuristic model of increasing sophistication and its integration into an enlarged paradigm shared by the Marxists with other currents

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<sup>33</sup> CHRISTOPHER HILL, 'The English Revolution,' in *The English Revolution, 1640: Three Essays*, ed. HILL (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1940), 9–82; CHRISTOPHER HILL and EDMUND DELL, eds, *The Good Old Cause: The English Revolution of 1640–60: Its Causes, Course and Consequences*, Extracts from contemporary sources (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1949), 30.

<sup>34</sup> ERIC HOBSBAWM, ed., *Labour's Turning Point, 1880–1900*, Extracts from contemporary sources (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1948).

<sup>35</sup> Professor EVANS had briefly referred to *Labour's Turning Point, 1880–1900*, in his 'Eric John Ernest Hobsbawm, 1917–2012,' *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy* 14 (2015): 207–60, see 217.

<sup>36</sup> HOBSBAWM, *The Historians' Group*, 29; JOHN SAVILLE, *The Labour Movement in Britain: A Commentary* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 115.

aiming at historiographical renovation which were autonomously attempting to absorb, in a more eclectic way, selected components of the Marxist theory.<sup>37</sup>

What remained unfulfilled, throughout the 1950s, was the persisting ambition of the British Marxist Historians to address and educate a broader non-specialist readership. This only began to become feasible in the next decade, as masterly reconstructed by Professor Evans in the substantial part of his volume justly dedicated to Hobsbawm's activities and triumphs as 'paperback writer.' The expansion of the secondary and university education, coupled with the fresh waves of radicalisation of the 1960s-1970s, generated a sizeable audience of scholars, students, general readers for an altogether new kind of popular historiography which acted at the same time as a powerful medium for the *haute vulgarisation* of the historiographical revolution at international level too. Hobsbawm was a key-protagonist in the invention of the multi-layered language which was necessary to address such a diverse constituency, so that his books stand out as essential documents for the study of the changes that have been affecting the global historical culture of our age.<sup>38</sup>

Here I come to a last, in my view the most unique aspect of Hobsbawm's contribution to the general reorientation of contemporary historiography, namely his work and achievements in the specific field of world history.<sup>39</sup> In 2005 The Folio Society of London has republished Hobsbawm's tetralogy (*The Age of Revolution, The Age of Capital, The Age of Empire, The Age of Extremes*) under the unifying title *The Making of the Modern World* in its collection of fiction and nonfiction 'classics.'<sup>40</sup> Only time will show if Hobsbawm will obtain or retain that status of a 'classic,' to be counted among the fifty or hundred 'key thinkers' on history 'von Homer bis Hobsbawm,' to which he has been often elevated even before his death in 2012.<sup>41</sup> In the meanwhile, we are on solid ground, I believe, in regarding Hobsbawm's four volumes as comparable to the most significant and representative specimens of a particular category of 'great historical enterprises.'<sup>42</sup>

Seen from a longer-term perspective, Hobsbawm's history of the modern world stands in fact at the confluence between two major trends in intellectual history – the twentieth century historiographical revolution and an older, thin line of authors running throughout contemporary historiography from Ranke onwards, of which Hobsbawm could be considered perhaps the last heir. What all these

<sup>37</sup> TEODORO TAGLIAFERRI, "Diventare storici anche del tempo presente": la crisi del 1956 e la storiografia marxista britannica,' *Studi Storici* 47, no. 1 (2006): 143–83, see 146–57.

<sup>38</sup> EVANS, *Eric Hobsbawm*, 287–40. Some reviewers have taken exception to the detailedness of this aspect of his book but, from the standpoint of the history of historiography at least, one is compelled to disagree with them.

<sup>39</sup> HARVEY J. KAYE, 'Eric Hobsbawm on Workers, Peasants and World History,' in KAYE, *The British Marxist Historians*, 131–66.

<sup>40</sup> ERIC HOBSBAWM, *The Making of the Modern World* (London: The Folio Society, 2005).

<sup>41</sup> MARNIE HUGHES-WARRINGTON, *Fifty Key Thinkers in History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2007), 178–88; WERNER BERTHOLD and MARIO KESSLER, *Klios Jünger: Hundert Historiker-Porträts von Homer bis Hobsbawm* (Leipzig: Akademische Verlagsanstalt, 2011).

<sup>42</sup> DAVID KNOWLES, *Great Historical Enterprises* (London: Nelson, 1962).

scholars have in common, whatever their obvious differences, is the firm belief that the ultimate goals of the historical profession should be, first, the explanation of the development of humanity as a whole, second, the production of synthetic and intelligible overviews of the human past which would transform this knowledge into the possession of mankind at large.<sup>43</sup>

In Hobsbawm's case, this interpretation of the professional historian's task was intimately connected (as we are now in the position to better understand thanks to the biographical materials put at our disposal by the work of Professor Evans) with his precocious, adolescent's choice to become a 'Marxist intellectual' searching for personal salvation in the community life of the global missionary 'Church' directed from Moscow.<sup>44</sup>

What the young Hobsbawm absorbed from his way of experiencing Marxism was, first of all, a set of meta-empirical and mythistorical assumptions which never ceased to pervade and shape his approach to the past. The most fundamental one was an ontological notion of the unity of human history – the idea, I mean, according to which history was a single secular process of self-realization of man in time whose essential content was '*progress*,' understood in the sense of an objectively given possibility to advance towards the goal depending, in the last resort, on human conscious efforts.<sup>45</sup>

From the pages of Hobsbawm's diary we discover that, during his school years in London, well before undertaking a historian's career, Hobsbawm developed the habit of organising his historical knowledge by combining together every bit of relevant information he came across into the comprehensive framework of what he continued to compare for a time to an edifice of 'bricks' – 'the house of my idea of history,' as he noted in 1940. 'While I read and listen,' he had written in 1935, referring to the conventional teaching of history at school,

I put what is useful into my mental apparatus. Gradually I see [...] how a picture of history is crystallizing out of it all. At the moment I just see individual contours – in some instances cornerstones, in other just simple rows and groups of bricks. The longer I study, the more I hope to enlarge my picture. Of course, you never put it together completely, but perhaps one day I'll have all the cornerstones there. *Thanks to the dialectic, I'm on the right way.*

But this holistic perception of the subject-matter of history (in which the whole, the vision of the overall plan of the house, intuitively and logically preceded the parts, the single factual bricks) was only one aspect of Hobsbawm's more general positivist-romantic attitude to reality. To be a Marxist meant in fact, for the seventeen years old Eric, to possess a wonderfully 'all-embracing,' cosmic

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<sup>43</sup> TEODORO TAGLIAFERRI, *Dimensioni della storiografia contemporanea*, I - *Nel Secolo della Storia* (Naples: Giannini, 2013), 151–53.

<sup>44</sup> EVANS, *Eric Hobsbawm*, 64, 205.

<sup>45</sup> ERIC HOBSBAWM, 'Introduction,' in KARL MARX, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1964), 9–65, see 12.

‘*Weltanschauung*.’<sup>46</sup> Still sixty years later, in a 1995 interview, Hobsbawm dwelt on the enduring traces left upon him by his original approach to Marxism. Having been asked to explain why he had recently described himself as a ‘paleo-Marxist,’ Hobsbawm remembered how he had grown up as a Marxist in a tradition, leading from Engels to the Soviet Marxism of the Thirties, which believed that Marxism could be an interpretation of the entire universe, not simply of politics or human society. And he added that he had never found easy to escape from this combination of historical and dialectical materialism in subsequent decades.<sup>47</sup>

To be sure, in an article written for *Rinascita* in 1987, Hobsbawm recognised his debt towards Antonio Gramsci as the author who had helped the Marxists of his generation to free themselves from the interpretation of Marxism ‘as a variant of determinist positivism’ codified in the notorious chapter fourth of the Stalinist *Short Course of History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (1938).<sup>48</sup> Indeed, what clearly emerges from his papers is that Hobsbawm’s juvenile enthusiasm for the Soviet Russian *DIAMAT* and the impersonal forces making for the socialist Last Judgment was inflected from the start by a belief and admiration in the creative powers of man. This humanist faith, on the other part, tended to focus on the heroic deeds of a minority of global revolutionaries and was tempered by a certain distrust in the ability of the mass of mankind as a whole (its 95 per cent, Hobsbawm wrote in 1934!) to rise above the level of the ‘average human being’ only by their own forces, in an admixture of stentorian determinism and elitist voluntarism which was after all typical, in different combinations, of the Marxism of the Third International.<sup>49</sup>

But these are only few examples of the multitude of hints scattered in the book, in particular in its first half. I’ve dwelt a little on the seemingly more abstract facets of Hobsbawm’s biography because I wanted to draw attention to the profound relevance of Professor Evans’ work to the history of ideas too. Lewis Namier once wrote that, underlying the ideas, there is a music of the emotions ‘to which the ideas are a mere libretto, often of very inferior quality.’<sup>50</sup> I don’t share in any way Namier’s disparagement of ideas. But there is some truth in the first, more constructive part of his maxim. The very rare merit of Professor Evans’ work, due in part to the extraordinary richness and literary quality of its sources, in part to the mastery with which the biographer managed to make the most of Hobsbawm’s unpublished papers, is that his book provides invaluable insights into the emotional roots of the thoughts of a great historian, allowing the reader to understand his

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<sup>46</sup> EVANS, *Eric Hobsbawm*, 49 (my italics), 56, 144.

<sup>47</sup> MICHAEL HANAGAN, LISE GRANDE, NASSER MOHAJER, and BEHROOZ MOAZAMI, ‘History in the “Age of Extremes”: A Conversation with Eric Hobsbawm (1995),’ *International Labor and Working-Class History* 83 (2013): 14–30, see 19–20.

<sup>48</sup> ERIC HOBSBAWM, ‘Per capire le classi subalterne,’ *Rinascita*, February 28, 1987: 23.

<sup>49</sup> EVANS, *Eric Hobsbawm*, 50, 51.

<sup>50</sup> LEWIS B. NAMIER, ‘Human Nature in Politics,’ in NAMIER, *Personalities and Powers* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1955), 1–7, see 4.

ideas – so to say – from the inside out. It remains to be hoped that the music emanating from so many pages of Professor Evans' book will not go lost in a prospective Italian translation that we must look forward to see very soon on the shelves of our country's libraries and bookshops.