

History After Hobsbawm

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Past & Present

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The 'History After Hobsbawm' conference, held from 29 April to 1 May 2014 in London, celebrated and assessed Eric Hobsbawm's intellectual legacy by bringing together his former colleagues, students, friends and collaborators. Organized by Birkbeck and 'Past & Present', it featured keynotes by Mark Mazower (New York), Catherine Hall (London), Gareth Stedman Jones (London), Chris Wickham (Oxford), Maxine Berg (Warwick), Rana Mitter (Oxford) and Geoff Eley (Ann Arbor, MI). In opening the conference John Arnold (London) stated as the main objective to focus on 'where history is heading'. The panel sessions which explored this question critically, and at times passionately, presented a spectre of Hobsbawm's oeuvre. The programme paid tribute to the versatility of Eric Hobsbawm's interests by dedicating a session to his love for jazz in form of a 'piano and talk' performance by PETER BAILEY (Manitoba/London), which drew standing ovations from the hundreds of participants.

In the first Hobsbawm Memorial Lecture, MARK MAZOWER (New York) emphasized the influence of the 'Annales' on Eric Hobsbawm. Looking at his early and formative years at Cambridge, Mazower illustrated how he grew into a scholar who shaped and transformed the discipline unlike many others in his generation. As his own major sources of influence the names of Marc Bloch, Fernand Braudel and Maurice Dobb particularly stood out. In Cambridge, Hobsbawm attended Marc Bloch's lectures and increasingly turned to economic history, while developing 'long-standing ties with France' and especially with Fernand Braudel. Inspired by Braudel's work, he quickly became the 'centre of an intellectual movement' that integrated Marxism and Historicism, applying 'research strategies' that set 'a new agenda for modern history.' Moreover, Hobsbawm turned from European to global perspectives, proposing

that historical analysis should focus on 'social economic factors and structures rather than ideas.'

GARETH STEDMAN JONES's (London) keynote lecture likewise emphasized a constant in Eric Hobsbawm's biography, relating his lifelong and 'unapologetic' commitment to Marxism and communism to his early Weimar years, where he witnessed the rise of fascism to which communism formed the countermovement. Stedman Jones presented what he saw as the major defects in Marxist theory and differentiated diverging strands of Marxism in the European context. He particularly singled out the British reception, as it allowed, unlike its French and German counterparts, the 'marriage between the Marxist and empirical tradition.' He characterized the particular Anglo-Marxism of the 1950s and 1960s as a 'rather unpolitical' and more theoretical movement and attributed this quality to the success of the journal 'Past & Present', which became the most influential history journal in the world. JOHN BREUILLY (London), who looked at 'Hobsbawm's Changing View on Nationalism,' also regarded Hobsbawm's Weimar years and the 'role of world communism' as the opponent to fascism as his key motivations for his political commitment. STEFAN BERGER (Bochum), in contrast, highlighted that Eric Hobsbawm could have chosen two paths – Zionism or communism – and therefore related his deliberate choice of communism to his outspoken anti-Zionism.

The context of empire, colony and their relationship to the metropole constituted one of the conference's cornerstones. In the session on 'Britain, Empire and Europe,' ANTOINETTE BURTON (Urbana, IL) provided a critical view of Eric Hobsbawm's writing, whose 'undirectional' approach she described as 'antiphonal.' According to Burton, imperial grand narratives have 'scarcely improved from Hobsbawm's work'. As a result topics such as race and gender, and feminism in particular, were being left out.

JAN RÜGER (London) suggested that in understanding Europe as an 'intellectual construct' Hobsbawm had presented a 'flexible concept' of Europe. Rüger emphasised the relevance of this approach when criticising his

torical narratives that portrayed the British Empire as singular. He drew attention to the similarities between the European states and the British Empire, sharing cultural conceptions and imperial practices. The degree of British engagement with European affairs as well as the prevalence of trending ideas and concepts made it therefore 'difficult to draw a line between Britain and Europe in an imperial context.'

A similar interpretation was put forward by MAYA JASANOFF (Cambridge, MA). She described the role of Britain and especially of London as a 'hub of exiles' with a 'wide spectre of political activity' as an additional decisive influence in Hobsbawm's life. Her paper compared Hobsbawm to Joseph Conrad, whom she denoted as the 'quintessential novelist of colonial history.' In addition to their biographical similarities as two continental emigrants settling in Britain, they both were 'author's of modern globalisation.'

The theme of empire was also evoked in the session entitled 'The Invention of Tradition.' VIVIAN BICKFORD-SMITH (Cape Town) explored the creation of national identity in the context of the commemoration of war in Britain and its equivalent in South Africa. He illustrated the central role of local governments in the 'invention of tradition' with the examples of war memorials in Cape Town and Durban. JAY WINTER (New Haven, CT) looked at the significance of the commemoration of the First World War in Australia's Anzac Day, focussing on the particular nature of this 'celebration' that combined the 'worship of military with nostalgia and kitsch.' CAMILLA SCHOFIELD (Norwich) looked at the invention of tradition in the context of demographics in Britain in relation to its colonial past. Concentrating on the example of Spitalfields in East London, she analysed how housing projects of the 1960s and 1970s aimed at the creation of 'multicultural spaces.'

In the panel on 'Resistance in the Colony, Resistance in the Metropole' BILL SCHWARZ (London) pointed to the Haitian Revolution as missing in Hobsbawm's history of revolution. Schwarz referred to the work of C.L.R. James who saw slavery as the motivating force in creating 'historical agency for revolution'. James had conceptualised rev-

olution in the Trotzkyian sense as 'permanent revolution,' as opposed to the teleological, two-stage theory in traditional historical materialism. In the same session, HOWARD CAYGILL (Kingston) turned to Hobsbawm's earlier work on 'primitive rebels'. Caygill drew again attention to the great influence of Braudel on Hobsbawm, highlighting Braudel's decided rejection of the positivist assertion that 'if the facts are right, the conclusions come by themselves.' YASMIN KHAN (Oxford) concluded the session by arguing in her paper on India in the 1940s that 'imperial resistance was less present' in narratives of the two world wars and that this was also true of Eric Hobsbawm's work.

As Hobsbawm himself had stated that the writing of history means to 'remember what others forget,' many other panels similarly turned to some of the blindspots of his work, such as environmental history, a theme which was well-presented at the conference, with papers by SUNIL AMRITH (London), GEOFFREY PARKER (Columbus, OH) and HARRIET RITVO (Cambridge, MA). Parker proclaimed the necessity to factor environmental disasters into historical narratives, that is their relevance for political events such as revolution and crisis. Highlighting the contribution of Julia A. Thomas to this field, Parker advocated the inclusion of an environmental perspective as part of the 'new materialism'.

These themes were taken up in the session on capitalism, where PRASANAN PARTHASARATHI (Boston) explored the effects of late capitalist production modes on the environment, inaugurating the 'new geological age' of the Anthropocene. The effects of industrial production on the climate are leading to a new teleology, towards the 'exhaustion of the planet.' Similarly, EMMA ROTHCHILD (Cambridge/Cambridge, MA) concentrated in her paper on 'Capital and Climate' on the history of the 'intended contest of nature' throughout the history of capitalism, starting with early mining and the conquest of nature through industrial (infra-) structures such as railway systems. She also addressed the methodological models of macro vs. micro history, taking a stance for a 'micro-economic' perspective. DONALD SASSOON's (London) paper on 'The Triumph

of Capitalism in the Age of Empire' presented a critique of capitalism that elucidated the main characteristics of bourgeois society in a way that still has much actuality today. Sassoon particularly hinted at the necessity to veil the nature of the capitalist system in modern popular culture.

The discussion of capitalism and economic history continued with a keynote roundtable presentation featuring MAXINE BERG (Warwick), CHRIS WICKHAM (Oxford) and RANA MITTER (Oxford). Maxine Berg discussed the challenges of writing a global economic history and underlined the contribution of Eric Hobsbawm to this approach. Her paper explored the 'global origins of industrialisation', factoring in technological progress, production modes and forms of consumption. With the 'globalisation of production,' Berg argued, the 'global market' began to give a 'cosmopolitan character to production and consumption.' She integrated both the global, macro-historical view with a micro perspective by concentrating on the 'local world' and its material culture. In the same session Chris Wickham presented his method of comparative economic history, including a global perspective on the economies of the central middle ages.

CATHERINE HALL's (London) keynote lecture was described by many participants as the highlight of the conference. Turning to British slave history as a chapter of 'the past that is not the past,' she provided insights into the 'Legacies of British Slave-Ownership' project she leads and addressed some of the blindspots of Eric Hobsbawm's work. While class had been central for him, slavery, race and gender were absent from his work. According to Hall, these categories need to be embedded in our understanding of the 'nexus of metropole and colony'. In a response to the lecture by Gareth Stedman Jones, Hall emphasised the value of Marxist ideas for these purposes, as they provided crucial categories for the analysis of historical structures. She characterized the history of slavery as paragon of Marx's quote that 'capital comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt.' The connection between capitalism and slavery demonstrated that the questions which Marx had asked 'are still rel-

evant'.

Hall emphasised the degree to which Britain's wealth had depended on slavery. Colonialism had to be seen as an 'integral part' of the industrial revolution. Hall drew attention to the opposition between freedom and slavery which embodied the 'dichotomy of the modern world.' White men had sought liberty and rights through the acquisition of property and by prospering from slaves as property. The commodification of the slave's body was mirrored in gender relations, as slave 'housekeepers' were objects of sexual desire for their masters. The illegitimate 'mulatto' offspring of those enforced sexual relations however generated a key argument in the abolition of slavery as those children were entitled to the master's property. In this sense, sexually subjugated slave women became 'transmitters of capital.' The immorality and brutality of slave owners therefore created at the same time 'agency for the abolition of slavery.'

Hall remarked that the topic of Caribbean slaves had vanished as soon as sugar stopped being a major economic interest and that 'the trauma of slavery is not over' as its legacy could still be seen in today's 'figures of black underachievement' and 'structural inequality.' Facing this 'part of the past which has not passed', she suggested, 'involves the recognition of the persistent privileges that have belonged to whiteness' and which explain the 'ill-gotten prosperity' of Europe.

In the closing lecture GEOFF ELEY (Ann Arbor, MI) stressed the role of Eric Hobsbawm's friendship with Margot Heinemann who had taught Hobsbawm 'what it meant to be a communist.' Alongside the victory of communism over fascism, Eley attributed Hobsbawm's consistent attachment to communism to these early friendships and to his personal experience of displacement as well as to his cosmopolitanism. Although Eley denoted this affiliation as 'cathexis' he emphasised his admiration for Hobsbawm's pursuit of one cause. 'It was never just his remarkable qualities as historian that made him so inspiring as a model but the consistency of his stance as a politically engaged intellectual.'

Conference Overview:

Eric Hobsbawm Memorial Lecture:
Mark Mazower (Columbia), Europe
Chair: John Arnold

Plenary: Gareth Stedman Jones (Queen Mary), Marxism
Chair: Miles Taylor

Session 1 - The Crisis of the 17th Century
Chair and convenor: Mike Braddick

Sanjay Subrahmanyam (UCLA), Crisis of What, Crisis for Whom?

Geoffrey Parker (Ohio State), From General Crisis to Global Crisis

John Elliott (Oxford), Hobsbawm's 'Crisis' in context

Session 2 - Protest and Rebels in Modern Times

Chair: Steve Smith; Convenor: Ilaria Favretto

Lucy Riall (EUI), Rural Violence, Class Conflict and the Politics of Memory in Sicily (1820-2011)

François Jarrige (Bourgogne), Machine Breakers in the 19th Century: History of Industrial Violence after Eric Hobsbawm

Ilaria Favretto (Kingston), New Workers and Old Traditions: Folk Justice Rites, Charivari and Factory Protest in 1960s-1970s Italy

Session 3 - Britain, Empire, Europe

Chair: David Feldman; Convenor: Jan Rüger

Antoinette Burton (Illinois), Antiphonies: Call and Response in Empire History

Maya Jasanoff (Harvard), Lost at the Imperial Turn

Jan Rüger (Birkbeck), Europe and the British Empire

Session 4 - Stories of Family and Class in Modern Britain

Chair: Matthew Hilton; Convenor: Jon Lawrence

Jon Lawrence (Cambridge), Inventing the 'Traditional Working Class': A Re-analysis of Interviews from Young and Willmott's 'Family and Kinship in East London'

Alison Light (Newcastle), Migrants and Tall Stories: Family History as Public History

Julie-Marie Strange (Manchester), In Small Things Remembered: Working-class Autobiography and the Family Story c.1870-1914

Session 5 - Latin America

Chair: Lucy Riall; Convenor: Alan Knight

Paulo Drinot (UCL), Latin America: Eric Hobsbawm's Laboratory of Historical Change

Joan Martinez Alier (Barcelona), Hobsbawm, the Environmentalism of the Poor, and the Global Movement for Environmental Justice in Latin America

Alan Knight (Oxford), Hobsbawm and Banditry in Latin America

Session 6 - Global Environmental History

Chair: Rana Mitter; Convenor: Sunil Amrith

Harriet Ritvo (MIT), Animals, Plants and History

Sunil Amrith (Birkbeck), Environmental History in an 'Asian Century'

Paul Warde (UEA), Everywhere and Nowhere: The Fate of Social and Environmental History in the Anthropocene

Session 7 - Resistance in the Colony; Resistance in the Metropole

Chair and convenor: Bill Schwarz

Howard Caygill (Kingston), What is to be Done with the Bandits?

Diana Jeater (UWE), Tradition, Nationalism, and Banditry: Viewing Hobsbawm from the South up

Yasmin Khan (Oxford), The Pitfalls and Power of Narrative History: India in the 1940s

Session 8 - Marxism and Post-Marxism

Chair: Brodie Waddell; Convenor: Andy Wood

Lucy Robinson (Sussex), History, Young People and Protest in the Twenty-first Century

Jane Whittle (Exeter), Post-Marxism, the Development of Capitalism, and a Manifesto for the History of Everyday Life

Andy Wood (Durham), Hegemony, Subordination and Resistance in Early Modern Social Relations: What Remains of Historical Materialism?

Plenary: Chris Wickham (Oxford) / Maxine Berg (Warwick) / Rana Mitter (Oxford), World Histories

Chair: Frank Trentmann

Plenary: Peter Bailey (Manitoba/London), The Other Captain Swing: Eric Hobsbawm and Jazz (with piano)

Chair: Matthew Hilton

Plenary: Catherine Hall (UCL), Gendering Property, Racing Accumulation

Chair: Matthew Hilton

Session 9 – Capitalism

Chair and convenor: Frank Trentmann

Prasannan Parthasarathi (Boston), Economic Divergence and Convergence in the Anthropocene

Donald Sassoon (Queen Mary), The Triumph of Capitalism in the Age of Empire

Emma Rothschild (Cambridge/Harvard), Capital and Climate

Session 10– Frameworks of Historical Explanation

Chair and convenor: Filippo de Vivo

Peter Burke (Cambridge), Why Capitalism? Marx, Braudel, Hobsbawm

Joanna Innes (Oxford), Eric Hobsbawm as 'Past & Present' Editor

Renaud Morieux (Cambridge), Eric Hobsbawm and the Uses of Comparison: France and Britain

Session 11 – What Happened to Class?

Chair: John Tosh; Convenor: Sean Brady

Sonya Rose (Michigan/Birkbeck), Gender and Labour History: Where Are We Now?

Marjorie Levine-Clark (Denver), 'Not loafers, but men': Unemployment, Welfare, and Working-Class Masculinity, 1870-1930

Sean Brady (Birkbeck), Has Class Vanished from Historical Enquiry? A Historiographical Retrospective

Session 12 - The Invention of Traditions

Chair and convenor: Emma Griffin

Vivian Bickford-Smith (Cape Town), Inventions of Tradition within the 'Forgotten Na-

tionalism' of Britishness in South Africa

Jay Winter (Yale), The Invention of Sacred Traditions during and after the Great War

Camilla Schofield (UEA), The Invention of Multiculturalism in 1980s Britain

Session 13 – Nationalisms

Chair: Jan Rüger; Convenor: Stefan Berger

Stefan Berger (Bochum), Eric Hobsbawm and National History

John Breuilly (LSE), From Class Politics to Identity Politics? Hobsbawm's Changing Views on Nationalism

Bill Schwarz (Queen Mary), Nationalisms at the End of Empire: The British Case

Session 14 - Economic History and Material Culture

Chair and convenor: Giorgio Riello

Margot Finn (UCL), Class Acts: Consumption and the Ages of Capital

John McAleer (Southampton), Material Culture and the Historians: Objects and the Age of Empire

Pat Hudson (Cardiff), Industry and Empire viewed through some Key Welsh Flannel Objects

Plenary: Geoff Eley (Michigan), History and Politics

Chair: John Arnold

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