

# History in the “Age of Extremes”: A Conversation with Eric Hobsbawm (1995)



Eric Hobsbawm, 1917–2012.  
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MOAZAMI: First of all I would like to thank Professor Hobsbawm for agreeing to participate in this interview/discussion. It is quite a great opportunity for us to talk to you directly, as one of the most important Marxist historians of our time (if not the most important one), on some of the most significant questions that concern us as leftist intellectuals. Though we initially planned to have a discussion on most of your works, the breadth, variety and the importance of your last book, *The Age of Extremes 1914–1991*, led us to focus almost all of our questions on its themes. It seems that we cannot escape the temptation of talking

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about the immediate situation in which we live. Nasser Mohajer and I are glad that Michael Hanagan and Lise Grande also accepted our invitation to participate in this discussion/interview. I think, Michael, it is your questions that come first.

HANAGAN: I'll just begin with my question. Eric, a few years ago, in your Oxford Amnesty Lecture on “Barbarism: A User's Guide,” you argued that “one of the few things that stands between us and an accelerated descent into Darkness is the set of values inherited from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.” The defense of the Enlightenment runs through your work, it seems to me, from the *Age of Revolution* to the *Age of Extremes*. But doesn't the set of values inherited from the Enlightenment include the atomistic individualism that you portray as dissolving all sense of community and attachment in the modern period? Isn't the “disintegrating world” of the late twentieth century the result, at least in part, of the working out of a set of values contained in the Enlightenment tradition?

HOBBSAWM: Yes, I am sure it includes individualism. It also includes—I don't know about atomistic individualism—it also includes a number of other things that I don't particularly approve of; for instance, the Enlightenment was not very good on women. Nevertheless, I think the Enlightenment can't be entirely identified with either the historic period in which it flourished or indeed with the capitalism—the “commercial society” in Adam Smith's term—which I suppose people at the time regarded as its correlate. I think, for instance, the atomized individual is to a great extent the consequence of the development by capitalism of a consumer society and indeed the logic of capitalism. Nevertheless, even if I agree that in some ways you can't defend the Enlightenment 100 percent as it is, yet as Bernard Shaw once used to say, we all belong to the family of the great sentimental verities like life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness, and equality, fraternity, and liberty.

HANAGAN: Well, following a related line of argument, in the Oxford Lecture you suggest that the nineteenth century witnessed a combination of “material and moral” progress. Now the idea of the progress of “civility which took place from the eighteenth century until the early twentieth” seems a bit ironic to those of us who really first came across your work and remember you as one of the foremost participants in the “Standard of Living debate” in the 1950s. It raises the question, how has your perspective on the “Long Nineteenth Century” changed as you view it from the “Short Twentieth Century?”

HOBBSAWM: I don't think it has changed. As far as the standard of living is concerned, I never argued that the standard of living was going to lead in the long run to absolute deterioration—I mean it couldn't do so, as a matter of fact. What I did argue is that in the period of transition to industrialism, it undoubtedly led to a period of heavy pressure, including a period of deterioration—absolute deterioration—as well as relative deterioration or, as well as, subjectively felt deterioration. I think nevertheless that the nineteenth century as a whole was a period of improvement. It seemed to me that there was a

difference between liberals, who believed in gradual and continuous improvement, and socialists and Marxists, who believed that this progress and improvement would continue but, at a certain stage, only by the overcoming of the bourgeois society and its transformation to another society. The growth in the standard of civility seems to me to be undoubted, and both the socialists and the liberals shared this belief and assumed it was taking place. Until about 1914 it did. The basic examples are the gradual decline of torture, the gradual increase, if you like, the spread of the basic civil freedoms and rights, the freedom to publish, and so on. And, of course, the growth of education, which in the nineteenth century can be regarded as a major plus.

GRANDE: It is clear that by the end of the twentieth century, capitalism as a system had triumphed over communism. During the course of the century, however, it was not obvious that this would be the case. Why, in your opinion, did capitalism triumph? What would have had to happen in the twentieth century for the opposite outcome to have occurred (i.e., for communism to have triumphed over capitalism)?

HOBBSAWM: I think on this I have really substantially modified my view beginning with the period I began writing this book. Capitalism broke down, and it was not so much threatened by forces which it generated, by its grave diggers, if you like, as it dug its own grave. It looked as if it dug its own grave without anybody else doing it. And while capitalism passed through this period of crisis, the alternative appeared feasible. I don't believe that, in fact, communism ever provided a genuine challenge for capitalism. As soon as capitalism reformed itself, as it did after World War II, the relative weakness of the one communist country and the model of that country appeared to be clear.

Could it have happened differently? This is a question of counterfactual history. Supposing the political system had broken down with World War I and revolution had occurred in Germany, which is a contingency on which Lenin and the revolution gambled, then it is conceivable that a form of socialism would have triumphed in a large part of Europe and probably with better chances. I argue that one of the major difficulties of communism was that it arose in a country in which conditions for the development of socialism or communism were simply not present. Had it merely provided the spark for a wider revolution, it might not have ended in failure. But I believe that it is rather unlikely that the revolution in the West could have succeeded. I think the German Soviet Revolution wasn't likely to take place, and this became clear very soon. So to that extent, I think the chances of communism replacing capitalism were quite small. I think they were even smaller after World War II, for reasons of international diplomacy as well as because of the sheer weakness of the Soviet Union. That would be a quick answer to your question.

MOAZAMI: Let me start my questions with where you ended your 585 page narrative [of *The Age of Extremes*]. There you raise some serious concerns about the future. Here I am just summarizing what you have said. Of course, it is not the whole thing, but it provides an idea. You stated, "We do not

know where we are going. . . . If humanity is to have a recognizable future, it cannot be by prolonging the past or the present. If we try to build the third millennium on that basis, we shall fail. And the price of failure, that is to say, the alternative to a changed society, is darkness.”

From this remark some logical questions arise. Let me point to two related questions here: The first is, if the end of the “short twentieth century” marked the failure of past generations to achieve a much better life, then what makes you think that the efforts of a later generation, in the next millennium, would not follow the same trajectory?

HOBBSAWM: I think it is perhaps better to take one by one. These final words in my *Age of Extremes* are really another formulation of Rosa Luxemburg’s well-known statement that the choice is between socialism and barbarism. In other words, [between] a different society or a regression, a shift back into a worse society. And incidentally, it needs to be said that I don’t believe that socialism had proved to be impracticable in the late twentieth century. Of course, that socialism can be organized in a different way than it was practiced in the Soviet period.

Again, I don’t actually argue that life hasn’t become better. I mean, it demonstrably has for most people. The paradox of the situation, the reason why it is the age of extremes, is that the improvement, the progress—and the case for material progress is far stronger in the twentieth century than in the nineteenth—is combined with extraordinary catastrophes, tragedies, tensions, massacres. But if you actually look at it, we all live better, we are probably better off, we are more skilled, we are more—in our life times have become better. We have achieved more than our parents and our grandparents, mostly. So, that’s what I would say.

I don’t believe that material progress is likely to change even though I think it may be, in view of the environmental problems which the speed of economic and technological progresses has raised, it may have to be governed down to a more sustainable level. And I believe to the extent this is so, the ideal which most people in the West have assumed may be a constant unburdened improvement in the period standard of living, is not likely to be maintained. Stability and the high standard of living may well be attacked. Nevertheless, I wasn’t talking about material terms. In other respects, of course, socially, in terms of values of civilization and culture, the outlook is by no means so good. I wouldn’t wish to predict because to some extent, of course, for someone of my age, the outlook looks substantially gloomier simply because we have lived through, my generation has lived its life as one the luckiest generations in the West, in Western history. Things have got better for us for twenty-five, thirty, forty years without us having to do much about it, whereas our children have visibly a far more difficult situation to cope with: insecurity, uncertainty, as in the United States, relative stagnation of even real incomes, all of these matters. So, clearly looking from the older to the younger, it seems to us that the outlook for the next generation is not as good as it was for ours. But that may be merely a biographical view taken.

MOAZAMI: I am going to continue from this last point. If history, as you have argued over and over, does not follow a straight line of progress, then why not insist upon the view that the last part of our short twentieth century is only a transitory phase? While the sheer numbers of human lives lost in the recent historical developments (from the mid-eighties) is not even comparable to the dark period of Stalinization and the emergence of fascism in Central and Eastern Europe prior to the World War II, don't you think that your political and ideological identification with Soviet socialism is no longer tenable as a reasonable source of hope for the future? Don't you think there is much more to be criticized in "the really existing socialism" than you have done?

HOBBSAWM: Well, in the first place, I mean, it is a really long time since I had the political identification with Soviet socialism. It had been clear for a very long time [that it] was not a particularly successful system and indeed a very cruel system whose achievements were gained at enormous and—some people may argue—disproportionate costs. The case for those of us who were communists in other countries was not that they idealized that society, but that the existence of the Soviet Union was an enormous asset for progressives and communists anywhere else, that the existence of [a communist] country, whatever its internal defects, was a plus. If you look at the simple example, the latest example is of South Africa. Without the help of the Soviet Union, the support of the Soviet Union, the African National Congress would undoubtedly not have either come to power, or at least would have had enormously greater difficulties in doing so. Now, that's different from saying that you identify with the system that was there. At the same time, I don't want to reject everything that has happened there. Some of them were enormously positive, most notably the success, unique perhaps in a relatively backward country, of mass education, creating the mass basis for an advanced economy, advanced culture. After all, if you look at czarist Russia, it had an enormously sophisticated and gifted minority group of perhaps one to two hundred thousand people with a tremendous cultural achievement to its credit, and yet it couldn't have a sufficient basis, on which let us say, [to create] a working space program, which required a degree of really very high tech, you know a mass of people who are capable of manipulating and using twentieth-century high technology. It would not have been possible to do so. While there is no particular value in doing so, it indicates the success in creating a mass middle class or mass intellectual class, which I don't think one should dismiss. As for the end of the twentieth century being a period of transition, of course, it is. The point is, I would no longer wish to predict that transition to what. . . .

MOAZAMI: By drawing from your own previous works, one can argue that in any historical ruptures, some form of the "old patterns"—be it traditions (cultural or political), habits, institutions—remain, but in more general terms, social advances continue to exist in the new historical realities. If so, then why don't you imagine the persistence/resistance of (a) some of the material gains of the past period in the new century (namely welfare) and (b) the continuation

of some leftist traditions (including, the non-Stalinist Marxist traditions). Why not place our hopes in them for a better future? Why not retain a part of the past in our future?

HOBBSAWM: What has been acquired in the past will certainly, to some extent, remain. The question isn't that. The question of both welfare and the existing left-wing traditions is exactly what the historic force would be. It seems to me the historic force rested not necessarily on the ideas but on a particular material situation. The major problem, for the Left—I do not believe it to be an intolerable problem—the major problem of the Left being that of agency. Traditionally, Marxism and lot of other socialist movements assumed that the agency for overthrowing and replacing capitalism would be the class of workers on wages and salaries, whether you think of it as industrial proletariat or not; anyway, a working class. Now, it seems to be clear at the moment this class, so far from increasing, is diminishing, and I am not simply thinking of the manufacturing working class, including the technicians. We are moving towards a phase in which the economic system operates with a far smaller number of people, actually, with a smaller input, of quantity inputs of human labor. We may well find ourselves back in a different pattern to a society like the one of the precapitalist society in which the largest number of people will not be wage workers—they will be something else, either, as you can see in the large part of the Third World, people who are operating in the gray area of the informal economy, who cannot be simply classified as wage workers or in some other way. Now, under those circumstances, clearly the question is, how can this body of people be mobilized in order to realize the aims which unquestionably are still there and to some extent are now more urgent in form?

Again, as far as welfare is concerned, the problem which faces us is that of—temporarily, at least—a transformation or rather decline of the major mechanism of distribution, social redistribution, namely the national state. I don't say that the problem is entirely that, but you cannot simply say under these circumstances that the old acquisitions of both ideas and policies can automatically provide for the transition. One hopes so, but the problem is that of discovering ways of organizing, of formulating them, in a situation which is, to some extent, new and for which actually neither an adequate social analysis as yet exists, nor, in fact, even a descriptive analysis.

GRANDE: Professor Hobsbawm, I have heard you describe yourself as a “paleo-Marxist.” What do you mean by this, and how do you evaluate the developments within Marxist circles that have occurred in the past thirty years? What do you think of the direction the New Left has taken, and, more particularly, the direction its historiography has taken?

HOBBSAWM: That's a big question. What I mean by being a paleo-Marxist is that I'm a Marxist who grew up as Marxist in what you might call the tradition which leads from Kautsky, or Engels via Kautsky, to the Soviet Marxism of the 1930s. That is to say, Marxism is essentially, I won't say economic determinism, but it has its elements there, which were firmly anchored to the idea of base and

superstructure, an economic and social base. And secondly, which was a Marxism which believed that Marxism could be an interpretation of the entire universe, not simply as a politics or of human society. In a sense I was brought up in this combination of historical and dialectical materialism. Now, this isn't altogether easy to escape from, though clearly I try to adjust to subsequent developments or use subsequent discoveries.

Remember, when I grew up in Marxism, even the early Marx—the Lukacs early 1840s Paris Manuscript—Marxism was not yet discovered or common . . . I think I discovered one of the books by Henri Lefebvre in England during the war, around 1940, in a secondhand bookshop and took to it and was really excited by it. But still, in a sense, this was an additional layer to a Marxism which had already been formed early on. That's what I mean. So, that's the foundation of my Marxism. Now that doesn't mean that I have been stuck, as it were, in the simple Marxism of whatever it is, of the Engels "Socialism, Utopian and Scientific," although I still have sympathy with it.

So, then, now, what about the subsequent developments? I think I have tried, obviously, both to integrate some of these and especially the kind of Lukacs, the Hegelian type of Marxism. I tried also, of course, to develop, I imagine, in my own way, irrespective of what is in the text. I think that much of what I have tried to do is remote from the old orthodoxy: May I remind you that my Marxism was so remote from this orthodoxy that none of my books were ever translated into Russian in the days of the Soviets? So you think this indicates that I am not entirely a paleo-Marxist.

As for the development in the younger New Left, to some extent I had sympathy, but only limited sympathy. For instance, while I enormously appreciated the kind of culturalist turn which the New Left—following, as they thought, E.P. Thompson—gave to it, I think that they probably exaggerated a bit. I think the insistence on the force of agency and of consciousness is something, at least for me, as a separate factor, seems to be exaggerated. The idea of politics by consciousness raising, I could never actually buy it much. From the late '60s I found a good deal that I welcomed enormously—the revival and spread of Marxism, but nevertheless what strikes me is that it was largely an academic Marxism, a sort of bastard Marxism trying to combine Marxism with whatever happened to be the currently fashionable theories—structuralism being one them. Not that we cannot rephrase Marxism in structuralist terms. That would be easy and true, but whether that is its essence of it, I do not know.

I also found that in some instances these people simply did not belong to the tradition of the old and learned Marxists. Althusser, for instance, was a man whom almost all older Marxists, as well as some of the New Left, found unacceptable, even though at certain stages he was enormously influential in the New Marxist Left. Althusser didn't know what Marx was about, in my view. He didn't actually know very much Marx himself. So, in fact, some of the New Left Marxism, I didn't recognize. Still, there isn't such a thing as a single, true form of Marxism, so everybody can take Marx as a starting point and go in whatever direction they wish, even though I think some of these directions are misplaced.

As for the historiography, it’s difficult to tell. I mean, clearly some of the historiography has been—some of the New Left historiography—has been extremely fine. On the other hand, more recently there has been a lot of it that seems to me to be a relapse into essentially populist historiography, seeking not so much analysis, but empathy and propagandist points. I sympathize with them, but I am afraid that it is not what all Marxist history is made of.

GRANDE: Speaking of the currently fashionable, it is presently the trend in academic circles to devalue and discredit metanarratives. In increasing numbers, prominent academics on both sides of the Atlantic claim that it is foolish, indeed impossible, to write a history that attempts to account for everything. *The Age of Extremes*, however, is unapologetically metanarrative in its scope. What do you say to your colleagues in defense of your approach?

HOBBSAWM: Well, I don’t care what you call it—metanarrative or metahistorical, whatever—there are, it seems to me, two things—one thing history must do, and there are other things I want do in history. The thing that history must do is to explain how humanity got from the cavemen to where it is today. And whatever you like to do it, however you want to do it—this evolutionary or the developmental approach, or whatever—is an essential aspect of history. If history doesn’t deal with this, what is it in aid of? Admittedly, historians find it very hard to do so because they are too specialized, and so, consequently, it’s generally other people nowadays—historical sociologists, historical politologists and other people who are more likely to do this.

Still, one has got to try and fit in one’s specialization into this global question. And I have done so. I have concentrated, if you like, on the rise and transformations of capitalism, but without ever forgetting the main theme. The other thing which has interested me, in fact, is probably the first historical problem that I ever found important, even when I was at school, before I became an historian—and Marxism is the only way of doing it—is to see how things hang together. In other words, the great advantage of the base and superstructure model is precisely that it explains to you how everything, from human social relations, technology, culture, institutions, laws, philosophy, *everything* in a particular period is in some sense linked. It is linked, which I believe it to be. And consequently, this is what I have been trying to do. And how successful it is, is a different matter. But that is what I have been trying to do, particularly in these four volumes, to try to show how it is possible to do it. For instance, I have tried very hard to put in chapters on culture or science to see how these things could not but take the form they did even though they have their autonomous development, except in terms of the period in which—the social period, the historical period—in which they operated. I still believe that this is an essential task of history, though naturally it’s not the only task.

MOAZAMI: Well, I was going to ask you another question, but with the point that you just raised, I will change the order of the question, and that is, as a historian, how would you see the existential problem of history as a discipline? You



already explained some, but I just want you to stress more. What advice would you have for the historians of future generations, particularly for those who want to continue the tradition of social history? Now as an accomplished historian, if you wanted to do it all over again, with all your experience, what sort of history would you undertake?

HOBBSAWM: Well, I wouldn't undertake social history or economic history, but history—and this is the thing. When we were students in England the only kind of official history which had some kind of place for what Marxist historians were trying to do, was economic history. So we all called ourselves economic historians, although in fact not many of us actually were economic historians. We were interested in other things. We were interested in precisely the interaction between the economy and technology and other things. The same thing with social history. Indeed, it's a New Left distortion to say that what we have been practicing is social history. Of course, we have been practicing history which is particularly interested in the common people, because as people of the Left—in the socialist movement—these are the people that we are with and in favor of, but that is only one part. I tried to discuss this many years ago in a paper, "From Social History to the History of a Society."

The history of society seen in the broadest sense is history which includes the intellectual, ideological, political, as well as the social and economic—this is what we are at. There are, however, it seems to me, a number of modifications. Firstly, it seems clear to me that the traditional Marxist view of base and superstructure needs substantial modification. Partly, I mean in the light of the terms of anthropology, which clearly demonstrates that the same societies with substantially the same economic-technological base can be organized in very different ways. I take this point from anthropologists, and, in fact, there are also Marxists who have taken it—for instance, Eric Wolf in his completely brilliant book, *Europe and Peoples Without History*. So I think in a sense I would rephrase it to say that the economic-technological base provides to some extent the framework, the limitations, within which, culturally, a variety of different forms of organization can develop. Nevertheless, it provides limitations; there are some things it can't do.

That is one thing. The second major modification is one to which I have come to most recently, again in the light of the work of people who I think see themselves as people of the Left, of the Marxist movement, namely paleontologists and evolutionary scientists like Stephen Jay Gould, and also new theorists of chaos theory, which demonstrates that a purely determinist causal explanation is not only possible, but to some extent necessary, but only, as it were, *a posteriori*. You can show why a certain thing, as it were, developed to this point, by necessary steps, but this does not necessarily allow you to predict the way in which, in the old-fashioned, nineteenth-century way, we thought we could prolong the process of causal connections from past to present to future. It is still possible to do so to some extent, but to a lesser extent, and to this extent the scope of contingency is larger. One of my

characteristics as a paleo-Marxist is that I still don’t like this. I would prefer to see a situation in analyzing in which you can eliminate as much as possible these unpredictable contingencies. And I believe it is possible to say that these can, to some extent, be [eliminated]: Nevertheless, in principle I think that one has to abandon the old-fashioned belief that history can, as it were, be extrapolated into the future in the way in which most of us believed.

MOHAJER: Professor Hobsbawm, in Chapter 14, “The Third World and Revolution,” you assert that the failure of “Sub-Saharan regimes . . . dedicated on paper to the cause of socialism” is due to the fact that “they clearly belonged to a different species from which Marx and Lenin’s analyses had been defined” (450). Do you apply this method to other unsuccessful cases of non-capitalist development (Egypt, Somalia, Ethiopia, Algeria. . .)? Do you think that “socialist” experiences in Yemen, Afghanistan, and etc., failed because of insufficient economic development in these countries or the Stalinist model of socialization they followed? Or both? Did the absence of political democracy in these experiences play a role in their defeat?

HOBSBAWM: What I’m saying is, of course, that the traditional Marxist analysis is really difficult to apply to a number of these countries and simply because of their social structure and background. For instance, I mean, it’s very doubtful whether some of them are class societies in the later sense. Now this doesn’t apply, for instance, to countries like Egypt and Algeria, but it does apply to the various peoples who live in Benin or Malagasy or something like this. And I specifically said that the one country in which, to some extent, a Marxist analysis could apply because it had developed in that direction is South Africa, [where] indeed there are fewer problems. I think the Soviet model—to that extent—almost all the models of Western industrialization may not have been the best model for those countries. They didn’t have the economic and social foundations for it, and they very often lacked the cadres, and indeed it might well have been better for many of them to pursue a very different model.

So, whether the absence of democracy has much to do with it is . . . I’m not happy with the discussions of democracy. We know in a sense that as Marxist people on the Left, we are for governments, as it were, of the people, for the people, by the people, but what exactly democracy means under these circumstances is not so clear. It is perfectly clear that under certain circumstances there is no democracy at all, such as, for instance, under Stalinism. I don’t necessarily believe that democracy is a condition of economic development either for capitalism or for socialism. It would be desirable to combine the two, but whether it can be so combined is a concrete question. Certainly in some instances it hasn’t been so combined. I don’t think it is really relevant to the question of why socialism failed in some of these Third World countries. I think there are cultural differences, there are historical differences, and, above all, they are countries which are backward. In fact, it is not simply due to the exploitation of the Third World by the First World that it is harder to establish

a modern economy in Chad than it is in Hong Kong. There are historic factors which simply have to be taken account of, which must not be confused with any, so to speak, racialist or other judgments. The fact is that there are differences. Incidentally, as I pointed out in my book, Lenin himself did not hesitate to say that some countries were backward, including his own.

MOHAJER: Generally speaking, it doesn't seem that you tend to think the failure of "socialist experience" in the above cases has much to do with the absence of democracy?

HOBBSAWM: No, I don't think so.

MOHAJER: Further, when you analyze the downfall of the Shah, you do not specify the dictatorial character of the Shah's regime and anti-dictatorial character of the movement which led to the 1979 Revolution. Here too, you assert that the Iranian Revolution was "...the response to the program of the lightning modernization and industrialization (not to mention armament) undertaken by the Shah on the basis of the solid support of the USA" (453). My question simply is this: What is the relationship between social progress and democracy in your historical approach? Or rather, social progress and freedom as the conditions for the participation of the people in making history.

HOBBSAWM: I think almost any revolution is a revolution for freedom insofar as a revolution is against constraints, against domination by whoever and this is universally the case. What happens after this freedom has been achieved eventually is I think analytically quite separate. There is no question that the 1917 revolution in Russia was a revolution not merely against class rule—the rule of landlords, the gentry and so on—but against the state—against government, altogether. If anything, I mean it is natural, so to speak, the concept of rule being a form of village anarchy. I don't believe that necessarily this is a basis for further development. It could develop into, if you like, a more democratic or structured representative government, or it could develop as it did both in Russia and, let's say, in Mexico, into governments that were centralized, single party. In the case of Mexico, you could say there was an element of democracy insofar as the single party for many decades was genuinely believed to represent the aspirations of people and had, if you like, a genuine mechanism for consulting and mobilizing people, much more so than in the days of Stalin and in Russia. But the struggle for freedom itself produces conditions for further development. After all, I don't know what the situation is in Iran, but the struggle for freedom has not actually produced anything that most of us would recognize as democracy. But it was a major revolution.

MOAZAMI: Well, since this part of my questions are family questions, having to do with the family of the Left, let me call you Comrade Hobsbawm rather than Professor Hobsbawm. In fact, it is about your relationship with the New Left. You are considered, politically speaking, more or less a traditional Marxist. You said a paleo-Marxist, but as you know, your works are read widely and attentively by the nontraditional Left with as much care and

enthusiasm, if not more. They have even inspired many to convert to the New Left brand of Marxism. I wonder, how do you see this relation yourself? How do you characterize it? How is it possible that the impact of your scholarly works is different than your political activity?

HOBBSAWM: Well, of course, I welcome the fact my work is read and taken note of and that it helps to convert people to the Left, and any kind of Left is better than no kind of Left. That is why I found myself hailing the movement of 1968 and so on. This was a revival of the Left even though it wasn't the kind of Left I was used to, and to some extent, you could criticize it . . . in that they threw away their chances. But anyway, it was a major revival of the Left, and it did produce, basically, some very positive things.

As for my political work, I mean, I haven't really had much political work, directly political work, for a very long time. I used to be many years ago, until the collapse of, so to speak, the true faith of communism in 1956—I used to be a loyal, totally devoted Communist Party member, doing all the things that communists did, devoting their life essentially to this cause. After that I clearly didn't do more than the minimum amount of everybody on the Left, and I suppose that at certain later stages I got involved at least in my own country in political work. For instance, I was involved in the debates about the future of the Labour Party in the early 1980's, but essentially, I didn't do very much direct political activities. Indeed, I never did very much. I was a student activist and young professor activist; it doesn't give you much chance. Indeed I would have thought that my major political activity, as it has turned out, has been my writing books and articles and teaching. So, to that extent, there isn't a contradiction. If the people who read these books come to a different conclusion, as long as they are on the Left, I welcome them. Some of them do. Some of them don't. Some of them change their minds. But that essentially, I suppose, politically speaking, has been my major impact.

MOAZAMI: Now let me go to a more theoretical level. What are your disagreements or your points of convergence with two important Marxist, New Left historians of our time—the late Edward Thompson and Perry Anderson—both close friends and colleagues of yours?

HOBBSAWM: I think the relationship is different. Edward Thompson was an absolutely extraordinary thinker. In his way, a genius. A great person. Basically this establishes a different relationship to one with other people who are very intelligent and very bright and so on. So any disagreements I may have had with Thompson have always been subordinate to this enormous admiration for someone who has widened the whole scope of history writing in ways that none of us could have done. I have had my disagreements. I myself am much more skeptical of the role of agency as something independent than he is, and certainly I have expressed this in some of my writings. I don't believe that the British working class [was] made by the 1830s. I think that is a rhetorical metaphorical statement. So my own analysis of the making of the English working class would go way beyond that. On the other hand, I think his major

contribution, quite apart from his extraordinary capacity to inspire readers, his major contribution has precisely been that of seeing that the people, common people, have their own thoughts, that they are not simply the objects of history but the subjects. Now this I find actually converges with work which I myself in a different context tried to do, for instance in my *Primitive Rebels*. What I am trying to show there is that these people have got a logic to what they want to do. We may not accept the logic, but it isn't simply that they are reacting to suffering or to stimuli, but these are people of consciousness and they are trying to make terms, to come to terms, to form a view of the world, of how the world should be. Now I think in doing this I've been very greatly inspired and assisted by the work that Edward Thompson has done, not to mention that, of course, I find myself in enormous agreement with his writings on the eighteenth century, which he unfortunately didn't complete adequately.

As for Perry Anderson, I have an enormous respect for Perry Anderson. I believe he is the ablest of the generation of Anglo-Saxon Marxists after my own. You know, the first of the New Left. He is a very able person. I am inclined to think that there is a difference between my own kind of old-fashioned Marxism and his continental Marxism, even though, curiously enough, he himself has come to conclude that what he calls Western Marxism, which is very largely intellectual Marxism of the post-Stalinist period, is not sufficient. I disagree with him on a number of things. I disagree with him certainly on Gramsci. I disagree with him on his interpretation of English history and the development of working-class society, where I believe that Edward Thompson got the best in the debate with Tom Nairn and Anderson. I believe the idea that somehow or other that the development [of] British bourgeois society was cut short by some kind of compromise with feudalism is misconceived. I don't think I want to say more. But once again I think that it is a major work that he tells me he is still continuing with *The Lineages of the Absolutist State*. I look forward with great excitement to see the third volume when it comes. I also enormously appreciate his critique—that is, what he has been doing lately, as it were, of ideologists and thinkers, not necessarily of the Left, but of all kinds of current ones.

HANAGAN: In *The Age of Extremes* as well as *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, you critique Woodrow Wilson's assertion of the principle of the "self-determination of nations." In *The Age of Extremes*, discussing the success of the Russian Revolution, you list as a principle cause of the Bolsheviks' success that they were quite evidently the only government able and willing to hold Russia together as a state and therefore enjoyed considerable support from the other side—political, hostile, patriotic Russians. You don't spend any time considering the revolution's nationality policy. In the end, didn't the formation of a "Soviet Union" illustrate the revolution's need to come to terms with nationalist movements by according them a considerable degree of recognition?

HOBBSAWN: Well, that is certainly what Lenin thought, and, of course, it did in many ways. In fact, they sponsored, in some instances they created, nations and

national movements in parts of the Soviet Union. I think, paradoxically, this is so even in the Baltic states, certainly according to Lieven’s book on the Baltic revolutions, that however repressive the Soviet system was, because it officially recognized these cultures—linguistic cultures—separately, by the end of the Soviet period, Estonian, Lithuanian, and Latvian culture and languages were more deeply rooted than they had been at end of the twenty years of independence, and this is very much more so in the Asian parts of the Soviet Union. If one can compare, for instance, the situation of Azeris in Azerbaijan and in Iran. In Azerbaijan they were recognized [for] their language and separate cultures. How important this actually was in the formation and establishment of the Soviet Union, I don’t know. I keep an open mind.

I think it’s quite clear that Lenin developed his theory because he was largely thinking of the Poles and Finns. At that time, to overthrow czarism you had to link up with other anti-czarist forces, of which the national forces in one or two places were the obvious ones. It is possible that the contribution of this to the establishing of a firm Soviet Union was important, significant. I don’t know enough about it to be able to judge. I mean I am struck by the fact that in a lot of the Asian parts of the Soviet Union, in some ways the formula on which Soviet power was established was not so much to fit in with local national movements but to fit in with the local traditional social structures. This is, I think, one reason why in the first place, the Central Asian Republics remained—there was no sign of breakaway movements from the Soviet Union—and also why to some extent they were, shall we say, they had their own problems and, for instance, people would tie up to the Soviet power [which] would tie up with prominent clans or prominent things as against others. So in a sense it was a more complicated business than simply saying that Soviet nationality policy was correct and therefore they were able to do this. But I really would not want to make a judgment about it because I’m not expert in this field and could not be an expert in the field. What I do believe, however, is that the policy of the self-determination of nations, as formulated by Wilson and indeed Lenin, in the rest of Europe was a disastrous policy and, I think, longer on became a disastrous policy even in the Soviet Union. The idea of giving the Soviet republics the right to secession—this is exactly what, for instance, the USA refused to do—the USA fought the Civil War precisely to avoid the right of self-determination of the American states. So, I don’t think we could automatically assume, as so many people on the liberal, socialist, and even communist Left have done, that the right of self-determination for ethnically or linguistically defined territories is something that under all circumstances must be accepted. The results in Central and Eastern Europe have not been good.

HANAGAN: Further question: Stanley Hoffman’s review of *The Age of Extremes* claims that “Hobsbawm finds almost nothing good to say about the United States.” Given your views on jazz, New York City, and American immigration policy (until the 1990s), this seems a bit unfair. You also argue that

fascism didn't have much impact in the United States in the 1930s. How do you account for its weakness during the Depression years?

HOBBSAWM: I wonder whether this is a completely unfair criticism. It's perfectly true that I take it for granted—I take a lot of things about the United States for granted: its centrality in the twentieth century, the fact that this is, after all, the American century has been the enormous force of the American economy, the enormous power of American popular culture, and all sorts of things like this and, of course, by my own personal preference for things like jazz and also my own personal—it belongs to my generation too—sympathies for the New Deal and Roosevelt and Rooseveltian America, and the WPA. And yet I think there is something to the point that I lack a native sympathy with or possibly understanding of American civilization and this may show through. So I wouldn't wish to completely dismiss this as an accusation.

I certainly believe that what characterizes the USA is an extraordinary individualism, the basic competitive individualism . . . I mean this is the only country which is based on essentially an ideology of capitalism without any pre-capitalist—or very little in the way of precapitalist assumptions. And the idea, for instance, that the ideology is essentially one of bourgeois anarchism—you can see this present in the Republicans, who merely extend or extrapolate from a very common American assumption, namely that all government is bad. Now, if you wish to compare—this is a thing that neither Marxists nor non-Marxists have done systematically—the development of Canada and the development of the USA, Canada is much easier to understand for Europeans because the state is important. The opening of Canada, the Canadian West, is the establishment of state power and law over a large area. The relationship between the Canadian government and the Indians is different from the relationship of the American government and Indians. So, if one has to choose between the two, America is more exciting and obviously has gotten much further but, nevertheless, in a sense those of us who come from a European background find ourselves in more emotional, intuitive sympathy with the Canadian side. So this may show in the book but I mean I'm not defending it. But I'm making some concession.

As for fascism in the United States, for the reasons which I try and explain in the book, I believe that reactionary movements, [including] racist movements, they are all very strong, but they don't, I think, or didn't, belong to the fascist tradition as in Europe. Paradoxically it seems to me, posthumously, there's more sign of it. The fact that the ultra-Right today or an important section of the ultra-Right harks back to the symbols and even the ideological inspiration of European fascism, particularly Nazism, seems to me to be interesting. I mean, the people who put explosives under the railway lines and declare themselves to be sons of the Gestapo, I don't think it means they have the slightest understanding of fascism but that they choose this particular part of the past as the one to which they appeal is not insignificant.

MOAZAMI: My last series of questions are three short personal questions: What has been your worst period or memory of your life? And, of course, what has been the best?

HOBSBAWM: Well, I don’t know. I mean I’m not generally in the autobiographical mode. I don’t generally try to think in those terms. I suppose the worst period was in the fifties, particularly around 1956. This is partly because a period of considerable personal unhappiness coincided with what was for all of us who were communists in those days a really profound trauma. For most people, at least in England, certainly most intellectuals, the year 1956 was, we lived the equivalent of, the political equivalent of, a nervous breakdown and the break not only in past loyalties and personal friendships and so on . . . it was very, very hard. One of the great achievements I thought that we had was that those of us who went different ways at this time politically, maintained personal friendships and personal, even political, comradeship as far as possible. The best times is harder to tell because, I mean, the people who think the best years of their lives are sometime in the past are people whose subsequent lives have not been very satisfactory. On the other hand, it becomes really difficult to say that the best times are now because, I mean, in a sense that’s meaningless, so I prefer not to answer this question.

MOAZAMI: This is a hypothetical question. If you could have been born in another age (one of those ages that you have described yourself), which one would you have chosen and what would you have done?

HOBSBAWM: I don’t really think I would have wanted to be born in another age. I mean, as a historian, I know perfectly if I had been born whether it is in my father’s or grandfather’s position, I would have either been a cabinet maker in Poland like my grandfather, or I would have been like my father’s generation—a poor Jew getting around and not getting even a higher education, even though all these people were very, very bright, very smart, but they didn’t have the chances which my generation had. I mean, if you go further back in history—I mean if you’re going to be realistic about it—everybody thinks if you go back far enough, you’d be born a prince or a princess or something, but that’s not the way it actually would have been.

So, to this extent, I would have thought in my particular generation, somebody like myself probably had a better chance. And you can’t say that life hasn’t been interesting, especially for those of us like myself who have had a relatively quiet life in a stormy century. Obviously the people who have actually passed through the storms may judge it differently. But some of us have managed to live through this without actually having the enormous sufferings or passing through these tremendous personal sufferings and social catastrophes that so many people in this century have passed through.

MOAZAMI: This is the last question: What are your next intellectual projects?

HOBSBAWM: Well, I don’t know what I shall do because I don’t have that many more years to go. What I have been hoping to do at some stage, I mean



as a serious intellectual project, would be actually to continue the line of historical analysis which I started off in *Primitive Rebels*, as it were an analysis of the world, the politics, the view of the world, of people before the age of capitalism, industrial capitalism, as a possible introduction. I've done a little bit on that: I've done some lectures here and there about it—to try and see these things, as it were, as a system, to follow up what I believe Barrington Moore in a book which impressed me very much—in a book on injustice—in which he tries to see whether there is in all societies something like a general view as to what constitutes the good life or the unjust or the unacceptable life and under what circumstances people will feel that they ought to do something about it. This brings us back to some extent to the history of the Enlightenment—where we started—because it is one of the things I sometimes argue about with Isaiah Berlin, who believes that there isn't such a thing as a permanent, a universal value which all societies have.

I can't help feeling that there may be some ideas of what is an acceptable or good or just life or perhaps, putting it the other way around, what is an unjust and an unacceptable life. And I would like, if I still have the time to carry on, and working and discovering as you would, for instance, by the study of things like customary laws—there is a lot of medieval stuff about what are the ways in which common people thought of the ways in which social relations and human relations should be—could be—organized. That's I think what, if I have a lot of energy and time, I'd like to keep working on, but I dare say I would be doing one or two other more short-term projects.

MOAZAMI: So we are all waiting to see them, to read them. And thanks a lot, one more time, for accepting this discussion/interview.