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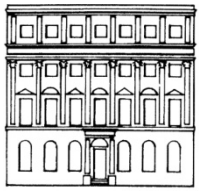

BULLETIN

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CLASSICS REREAD

THE GUERRILLA HISTORIAN: ERIC J. HOBSBAWM AND THE LONG NINETEENTH CENTURY

ANETTE SCHLIMM

ERIC J. HOBSBAWM, *Das lange 19. Jahrhundert*, vol. i: *Europäische Revolutionen,1749–1848*; vol. ii: *Die Blütezeit des Kapitals, 1848–1875*; vol. iii: *Das imperiale Zeitalter, 1875–1914*, trans. from the English by Boris Goldenberg, Johann George Scheffner, and Udo Rennert, foreword by Richard J. Evans, 3 vols. (Darmstadt: WBG Theiss, 2017), 1450 pp. with 11 maps, ISBN 978 3 8062 3641 5. €119.00

For a long time the long nineteenth century was not a fashionable period in German-language historiography. Just a few years ago David Blackbourn published an essay with the provocative title 'Honey, I Shrunk German History', in which he expressed his dismay that modern German history seems to consist solely of the twentieth century.[1] Since then, however, much has happened. Even apart from global history, which for a while seemed to have an exclusive claim on the nineteenth century, more historians are turning to the latter in order to develop innovative approaches and find inspiration for methodological discussions.[2] Thus it is timely that the publisher WBG Theiss has re-issued a German translation of an authoritative overview of the history of the 'long' nineteenth century, namely, Eric J. Hobsbawm's monumental three-volume work, first published in English between 1962 and 1987. This is the first time Hobsbawm's

Trans. Angela Davies (GHIL).

[1] David Blackbourn, 'Honey, I Shrunk German History', *German Studies Association Newsletter*, 38 (2013/14), 44–53.

[2] See Karen Hagemann and Simone Lässig, 'Discussion Forum: The Vanishing Nineteenth Century', *Central European History*, 51 (2018), 611–95, and Richard J. Evans, 'Writing the History of Nineteenth-Century Europe', *German Historical Institute London Bulletin*, 40 (2018), 7–18.

three volumes have been published in German as a complete work, bound and in a slipcase.[3]

Hobsbawm's world historical overview of the nineteenth century—like his extensive *oeuvre* in general—is rightly regarded as a milestone of twentieth-century historiography,[4] although, or perhaps because, Hobsbawm's work was methodologically and politically contentious and controversial. Yet even historians who by no means see themselves as political or methodological Marxists, praise the character, wit, and wisdom of Hobsbawm's works. In the many newspaper articles that were published on his death in 2012, his syntheses of the nineteenth century, and of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, were universally praised, and described as a 'great tetralogy',[5] a 'history of the modern world',[6] an 'economic history of the rise

[3] The publisher, however, has missed an opportunity to produce a proper new edition. This one does not contain new translations, but simply reprints the old ones, including all the original errors. Richard J. Evans's Foreword in the first volume could also have done with some proof-reading. Moreover, this edition is rather utilitarian. It lacks illustrations (which can be found in other editions), and the production, on the whole, looks cheap. The fact that pages were bound in the wrong order in the first instalment of volume one, and that the publisher simply ignored this, despite all queries, contributes to the impression that this edition has been produced just to generate sales. This work deserves better.

[4] See Matthias Middell, 'Eric Hobsbawm (*1917)', in Lutz Raphael (ed.), *Klassiker der Geschichtswissenschaft*, vol. ii: *Von Fernand Braudel bis Natalie Z. Davis* (Munich, 2006), 96–119; Lucy Riall, 'Forum on Eric Hobsbawm (1917–2012)', *Journal of Modern European History*, 11 (2013/14), 407–32.

[5] Niall Ferguson, 'A Truly Great Historian', *Guardian*, 1 Oct. 2012, online at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/oct/01/eric-hobsbawm-historian>, accessed 22 May 2019. It is not clear whether the volume *The Age of Extremes* should be seen as part of the series. Hobsbawm himself pointed out that he had written this book from a completely different perspective, and without a sound knowledge of the research. See Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991* (New York, 1996; first publ. 1994) (henceforth AoEX), p. ix. For the history of the book see Richard J. Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History* (Oxford, 2019), 562–80.

[6] Jonathan Jones, 'Eric Hobsbawm Changed How we Think about Culture', *Guardian*, 2 Oct. 2012, online at <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2012/oct/02/eric-hobsbawm-on-culture>, accessed 22 May 2019.

of industrial capitalism',[7] and a 'history of the capitalist world from 1789 to 1991'.[8]

The sheer size of the work is impressive, comprising, as it does, 1,300 closely printed pages in the German version. In addition, the narrative moves lightly from one topic and space to another, from Japan to Latin America, and from the history of opera to the bandits and social rebels who are stock characters in Hobsbawm's work.[9] In many of the tributes paid to him, Hobsbawm's international, world historical approach was related to his biography. Born in 1917 in Alexandria to an Austrian mother and a British father, himself the son of a Polish Jewish immigrant, Hobsbawm grew up between the wars in Vienna and Berlin. When the Nazis came to power, he went to London—and stayed there. During his academic career Hobsbawm cultivated contacts with foreign colleagues and spent long periods of time in North and South America in particular. Most of his life, however, was spent in Britain and he became one of the most important twentieth-century British historians, while also being part of the networked and cosmopolitan world of the twentieth century.[10]

As a Communist and Marxist historian, Hobsbawm was—in neutral terms—an exception, politically and intellectually; he and his work have always been controversial. He was loyal to the British Communist Party for a very long time, and he was strongly criticized for his 'defense of Stalinism' after the downfall of the Soviet Union.[11]

[7] William Grimes, 'Eric J. Hobsbawm, Marxist Historian, Dies at 95', *New York Times*, 1 Oct. 2012, online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/02/arts/eric-hobsbawm-british-historian-dies-at-95.html>, accessed 22 May 2019.

[8] Martin Kettle and Doronthy Wedderburn, 'Eric Hobsbawm Obituary: Historian in the Marxist Tradition with a Global Reach', *Guardian*, 1 Oct. 2012, online at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/oct/01/eric-hobsbawm>, accessed 22 May 2019.

[9] Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Manchester 1959); id., *Bandits* (London, 1969).

[10] On this see also his autobiography, Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (London, 2002).

[11] Kristen Ghodsee, *Red Hangover: Legacies of Twentieth-Century Communism* (Durham, NC, 2017), 137–8. On the political controversies around Eric Hobsbawm see Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm*, 545–52; 580–92.

He was also methodologically committed to Marxism, for example, as a co-founder of the Communist Party Historians' Group and of *Past and Present*, an important leftist journal advocating innovation. He was a force driving research on the history of work and the working classes, and on other non-bourgeois groups in modern society. He shaped not only British but also German historiography, going far beyond Marxism. Even if the three big syntheses on the nineteenth century plus the fourth volume, published later, on the 'short twentieth century' (*Age of Extremes*, 1994) are not Hobsbawm's only influential works, this article takes the recent re-issuing of the trilogy as providing an opportunity to re-read them. It will closely examine the creative element in producing the syntheses, discuss methodological problems, and clarify why the work should be considered less as introductory reading than as a classic that has itself become historicized as an interpretation of the nineteenth century from the viewpoint of the 'age of extremes'.

A Guerrilla Historian of the 'Long Nineteenth Century'

Hobsbawm's impact was less in conceptual work than in identifying themes and specific individual theses. He once characterized himself as a 'guerrilla historian . . . who does not so much march on his target behind the artillery fire of the archives, as shoot at it from the side, out of the bushes, with the Kalashnikov of ideas'. What he thought was important was 'to bring new perspectives into old discussions, and perhaps to open new areas, by taking new approaches'.[12] This method can be discerned in the trilogy under discussion here, which is not a synthesis in the sense of capping off the debate, but rather a synthesizing attempt that is intended to raise questions rather than to answer them once and for all.

The strength of the books lies more in identifying and presenting individual thematic emphases than in drawing up a methodological roadmap. The development of theories was not Hobsbawm's

[12] Eric J. Hobsbawm, 'Geschichtswissenschaft: Impulse für Menschen, nicht nur Fußnoten', in Gerhard Botz, Hubert Christian Ehalt, Eric J. Hobsbawm, Jürgen Kocka, and Ernst Wangermann (eds.), *Geschichte: Möglichkeit für Erkenntnis und Gestaltung der Welt. Zu Leben und Werk von Eric J. Hobsbawm* (Vienna, 2008), 69–78, at 76–7.

strength, and it is in vain that we seek theory-rich concepts in his work.[13] This also applies to the concept of the 'long nineteenth century', but it does not in any way detract from the great influence it exerted. And just because Hobsbawm did not explicitly define and problematize the term does not mean that he did not work with a specific historicity. Periodization—historians should always remember—is a powerful interpretative tool. It organizes history and underlines the significance of certain events, while other developments are subordinated to them as being less important.[14]

The idea of a 'long nineteenth century' extending from the French Revolution to the First World War has become highly influential, appearing in the titles of professorships, examination subjects, and university courses. Hobsbawm was surely not its only inventor, but he was instrumental in popularizing this temporal division,[15] which in the German-language area was mainly disseminated by Hans-Ulrich Wehler's publications.[16] Yet Hobsbawm's three volumes about the nineteenth century were not designed as a trilogy from the start. Hobsbawm himself once pointed out that it was more of a coincidence than a systematic work in three parts. It was only while working on the second volume, *Age of Capital*, that it became clear to

[13] Eric J. Hobsbawm, 'Peasants and Politics', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1 (1973), 3–22, at 3: 'It may well be a very complex matter for a zoologist to define a horse, but this does not normally mean that there is any real difficulty about recognizing one. I shall therefore assume that most of us most of the time know what the words "peasants" and "politics" refer to.'

[14] Charles S. Maier, 'Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era', *American Historical Review*, 105/3 (2000), 807–31, at 809. Maier also rejects the idea that centuries can represent meaningful periodizations, and criticizes the enthusiasm, widespread among historians, for creating 'short' and 'long' centuries in order to force historiographical contexts into the Procrustean bed of secular structures. In doing so, he refers explicitly to Hobsbawm. Ibid. 813. See also the fundamental work by Reinhart Koselleck, 'Geschichte, Geschichten und formale Zeitstrukturen', in id., *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt/Main, 1979), 130–43, at 131–2.

[15] On this see Jürgen Kocka's historiographical derivation in *Das lange 19. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart, 2001), 34.

[16] See Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte,* vol. iii: *Von der 'Deutschen Doppelrevolution' bis zum Beginn des Ersten Weltkrieges 1849–1914* (Munich, 1995), 1250–95: 'Deutschland am Ende des langen 19. Jahrhunderts'.

him 'that I had let myself in for a great analytical synthesis of the history of the nineteenth century'.[17] Not until the third volume did he explicitly discuss what held the entire nineteenth century together, between the Anglo-French, industrial–political dual revolution at one end, and the outbreak of the First World War at the other. And only in *Age of Extremes* did he succinctly sum up the nineteenth century in order to draw a contrast with the twentieth century:

> This [Western] civilization [of the nineteenth century] was capitalist in its economy; liberal in its legal and constitutional structure; bourgeois in the image of its characteristic hegemonic class; glorying in the advance of science, knowledge and education, material and moral progress; and profoundly convinced of the centrality of Europe, birthplace of the revolutions of the sciences, arts, politics and industry, whose economy had penetrated, and whose soldiers had conquered and subjugated most of the world; whose populations had grown until (including the vast and growing outflow of European emigrants and their descendants) they had risen to form a third of the human race; and whose major states constituted the system of world politics (AoEX, 6).[18]

Yet was it really the aggregation of capitalism and liberalism, a bourgeois age, and progress in knowledge and culture that turned this period of 125 years into a single era?[19] Hobsbawm's narrative is more sophisticated than this because the unifying bond is to be found at the meta level: the years between the 'age of revolution' and the beginning of the First World War were held together by the histori-

[17] Eric J. Hobsbawm, 'Geschichtswissenschaft: Impulse für Menschen, nicht nur Fußnoten', in Botz, Ehalt, Hobsbawm, Kocka, and Wangermann (eds.), *Geschichte*, 74.

[18] I quote from the English-language editions: *The Age of Revolution: 1789–1848* (New York, 1996; first publ. 1962), henceforth AoR; *The Age of Capital: 1848–1875* (New York, 1996; first publ. 1975), henceforth AoC; *The Age of Empire: 1875–1914* (New York, 1989; first publ. 1987), henceforth AoE. In addition, I quote from AoEX (see n. 5 above).

[19] Although the period being treated is given in the title as 1789 to 1848, Hobsbawm's 'age of revolution' starts not in 1789, but with the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, which he places in the 1780s.

cal transformation itself. The revolutionary changes of the nineteenth century are captured in several cross-cutting chapters which present a panorama of the world (or Europe) at particular points in time, so that differences are clearly visible. The world in the 1780s, which Hobsbawm's trilogy begins by describing, 'was at once much smaller and much larger than ours' (AoR, 7). It was predominantly rural and characterized by feudal power structures and absolute rulers. From an economic point of view, sluggish agriculture and active trade were more or less unconnected, and there were other power centres in the world apart from north-western Europe (AoR, 7–26). The world on the centenary of the revolution, by contrast, was quite different. It was divided into two parts: 'a smaller part in which "progress" was indigenous and another much larger part in which it came as a foreign conqueror, assisted by minorities of local collaborators' (AoE, 31). The 'progressive' part of the world was characterized by industry and the idea of political modernity—and the notion that progress was 'possible and desirable'—and that it was already happening (AoE, 31).

Progress was not continuous or purposeful, but displayed a specific temporal structure that matches the narrative structure of the three volumes. The first volume marches to the drum beat of revolutionary change at the beginning of the century. The second volume stands for the establishment and stabilization of the capitalist order, a phase during which the characteristics of the century that had first been hinted at were developed in an ideal-typical form. Bourgeois society stabilized itself and its characteristic features emerged into view: the capitalist mode of production spread to all corners of the earth and sectors of industry; and social inequality became entrenched. The third volume, finally, deals with the growing paradox of the century. The further the nineteenth century progressed, the stronger did its contradictions become. According to Hobsbawm, the imperial age was both a golden age and a time of crisis beneath the surface. The next revolution, the big turning point of the age, was imminent.

Not only experts will recognize in this structure the grand narrative of Marxism, despite Hobsbawm's heterodoxy. This historical dramaturgy is specific to Hobsbawm's 'long nineteenth century' and distinguishes his account (and interpretation!) from so many others who have adopted the same term. This is not apparent at first glance

because unlike other authors, Hobsbawm nowhere explicitly lays out the structure of his books. His trilogy is not prefaced by theoretical instructions for use, as is, for example, Hans-Ulrich Wehler's *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*.[20] Hobsbawm neither explained his theoretical assumptions, nor discussed his claims to offer an explanation. His roadmap for the three volumes remained unspoken. This may be because Hobsbawm saw the books as popular accounts, but it also reflects his restrained to critical attitude towards larger theoretical discussions. Thus the supposedly indeterminate nature of the 'long nineteenth century' might be precisely what contributed to its success. The term is memorable and makes sense immediately, referring as it does to undisputed turning points in the history of events. Meanwhile, Hobsbawm's underlying interpretations remain hidden until one is familiar with the whole work. His trilogy on the nineteenth century is therefore almost an anachronism, as the overall shape of the work cannot be appreciated by those who read only chapters and excerpts. The re-issuing of the trilogy in German is therefore a wonderful opportunity to (re)read the whole work and to engage with Hobsbawm's interpretation.

Capitalism and Social Struggles

The great pacesetter of Hobsbawm's nineteenth century, and its most important outcome, was capitalism. Its emergence plays a prominent part in his argument. For Hobsbawm, capitalism was the basis of a process of global transformation in the long nineteenth century. Yet he was not an orthodox Marxist in the sense of dismissing everything beyond the transformation of the mode of production as mere superstructure. His description of the emergence, stabilization, and maturity of bourgeois capitalism was socially comprehensive and not limited purely to the mode of production. In addition, he refrained from identifying unambiguous causalities in favour of lively portrayals. In his account, it remains unclear whether the economy caused, influenced, or accelerated the other changes. Apart from these subtleties,

[20] Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte,* 5 vols. (Munich, 1987–2009), vol. i: *Vom Feudalismus des Alten Reiches bis zur Defensiven Modernisierung in der Reformära, 1700–1815* (1987), 6–31.

however, Hobsbawm attached particular importance to the economic side of history. But it was not only for chronological reasons that he began his account with a chapter on the Industrial Revolution in England. Only by analysing this, he wrote, could we 'understand the impersonal groundswell of history on which the more obvious men [*sic*!] and events of our period were borne; the uneven complexity of its rhythm' (AoR, 28).

Hobsbawm did not present economic transformations purely at the level of quantification, even though the relevant chapters do not lack figures and statistics. In the chapter on the boom of the 1850s (AoC, 29–47), for example, he repeatedly emphasizes enormous growth rates: British cotton exports doubled; the total capital of the Prussian joint-stock companies jumped from 45 to 114.5 million Taler (without counting the railway companies); the steam power used by German fixed engines grew from 40,000 to 900,000 horsepower. These figures are impressive, and they are intended to show how radically the economy changed within a short period of time. But Hobsbawm's account of the capitalist economy is not limited to quantitative growth. It also shows the enormous diversity of this development, which means that he switches back and forth between different standards of investigation and between different themes. Sometimes he examines the history of financial problems, the state administration, and the influence of politics and world fairs, but he repeatedly looks at the worlds of experience of the historical actors, at their hopes and fears. The economic development that forms the backbone of his great narrative therefore represented not just a huge structural change, but one that included all areas of social and human activity. Thus the period of the great boom was not only one in which 'the world became capitalist and a significant minority of "developed" countries became industrial economies' (AoC, 27), but also the one in which contemporaries developed new ideas: 'the model of economic growth, political development, intellectual progress and cultural achievement' (AoC, 47).

It is hardly possible to distinguish between structural factors and critical events in Hobsbawm's account, because they were so closely intertwined. He linked the levels by giving the views of contemporaries a great deal of space in his account (and argument). According to Hobsbawm, historical change took place neither only in the big cabinets nor exclusively behind the backs of contemporaries. He

declared the historical actors and their expectations, in all their plurality, to be an important factor of history:

> Bourgeois expected an era of endless improvement, material, intellectual and moral, through liberal progress; proletarians, or those who saw themselves as speaking for them, expected it through revolution. But both expected it. And both expected it, not through some historic automatism, but through effort and struggle (AoE, 339).

Hobsbawm gave these struggles a corresponding amount of space in his account. On the one hand, for methodological reasons he saw these struggles as a condensation of otherwise possibly invisible developments;[21] on the other, he could use them to demonstrate that historical change could not be understood teleologically and as something uninterrupted, but only as eruptive, revolutionary, and unsettling. His 'long nineteenth century' began with a dual revolution,[22] which resulted in further unrest, revolts, and revolutions until 1848. For Hobsbawm, however, the significance of the 1848 revolution lay not only in the event itself, and certainly not in its successes, for 1848 was the classic failed revolution. What was crucial was a mediated effect: 'In a sense it was the paradigm of the kind of "world revolution" of which rebels were henceforth to dream, and which at rare moments, such as in the aftermath of great wars, they thought they could recognize' (AoC, 10) The revolution of 1848 influenced the years that followed through the hope and fear of its return (AoC, 10).

[21] 'Moreover, certain important problems cannot be studied at all except in and through such moments of eruption, which do not merely bring into the open so much that is normally latent, but also concentrate and magnify phenomena for the benefit of the student, while—not the least of their advantages—normally multiplying our documentation about them.' Eric J. Hobsbawm, 'From Social History to the History of Society', *Daedalus*, 100 (1971), 20–45, at 39.

[22] Hans-Ulrich Wehler adopted this idea, but applied it to German history. In order to be able to speak of a dual revolution in this case, the mid nineteenth-century industrial 'take-off', which is still the 'great boom' in Hobsbawm (AoC, 29–47), has to be linked with the revolution 'from above', that is, the foundation of Imperial Germany. See Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte,* vol. iii: *Von der 'Deutschen Doppelrevolution' bis zum Beginn des Ersten Weltkrieges, 1849–1914* (Munich, 1995).

Economic change on the one hand; permanent social struggle on the other. But this does not complete the panorama of the transformative period in Hobsbawm's Europe. Chapters on the history of ideas alternate with detailed descriptions of the 'agrarian problem', and scholarship and the arts had a firm place. The emergence of capitalism as a unifying thread and the variety of topics did not contradict each other, but together formed the 'compass' of his work.[23] The thematic and geographical variety displayed by this trilogy is exemplary and striking. It testifies not only to the author's broad interests and amazing erudition, but also to the outstanding complexity of his historical narrative.

Women in History and other Gaps

However interesting this interpretation of the nineteenth century is, it differs greatly from more recent approaches to the historiography of (not only) the nineteenth century. It would be futile to discuss all the points on which historians today see things differently from Hobsbawm. Only a few methodological aspects will be addressed here by way of example, namely, his blind spot for gender history, his conception of world rather than global history, and his concept of capitalism.

I am not the first historian to notice that while Hobsbawm included in his account many subjects that at the time were untypical—for example, bandits—he showed a remarkable lack of interest in women in history. In the reprint of his well-known essay 'From Social History to the History of Society' in 1997, he noted 'with embarrassed astonishment that it contained no reference at all to women's history'.[24] His description of the French Revolution in the first volume of his trilogy makes practically no references to the role of women in the revolution, if we discount the derogatory remarks.[25] The third volume, however,

[23] Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt: Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 2009), 17.

[24] Eric J. Hobsbawm, 'From Social History to the History of Society', in id., *On History* (London, 1997), 71–93, at 71.

[25] Marie-Antoinette remains nameless, but Hobsbawm describes her as a 'chicken-brained and irresponsible woman' (AoR, 61), and he points out that while the women among the Girondists were well known, they were 'politi-

devotes a chapter to the issue of gender. But here Hobsbawm explains that ultimately, the vast majority of women had no part in the history of the nineteenth century. He points out that in the Western world only the middle- and upper-class women had been integrated into the dynamics of the nineteenth century, while '[i]n the condition of the great majority of the world's women . . . there was as yet no change whatever' (AoE, 193). Although he provides references to the masculinization of the economy and politics (AoE, 200), gender relations do not provide a cross-cutting category for Hobsbawm's history of the nineteenth century. Admittedly, gender history only developed as a part of social history in the period during which Hobsbawm was writing, but this shows why the work feels as though it comes from a different age, and sometimes seems rather old-fashioned.

Something similar applies to Hobsbawm's conception of world history. Even if Jürgen Kocka writes, in an appreciation of Hobsbawm's *oeuvre*, that he was 'uniquely' ahead of the trend for global history as he always argued in a global historical way,[26] Hobsbawm's approach to writing a world-spanning history of the nineteenth century is outdated in the twenty-first century. In the nineteenth century Hobsbawm's world had a clear-cut centre, in (north-western) Europe. Even if he switches effortlessly between the various continents in his account,[27] for Hobsbawm the driving forces in the nineteenth century emanated from Europe and radiated out into the world. This Eurocentrism was not a mistake, or unconscious, but central to an approach that saw the English–French dual revolution as a

cally negligible but romantic' (AoR, 68). In the third volume, in the chapter on the 'new woman', however, there are references to the important role that women played in the French Revolution (AoE, 200).

[26] Jürgen Kocka, 'Eric Hobsbawm als Sozial- und Welthistoriker', in Botz, Ehalt, Hobsbawm, Kocka, and Wangermann (eds.), *Geschichte*, 29–38, at 30–1.

[27] It is obviously not intended as praise when Michael Burleigh writes: 'A synthetic quartet, from *Age of Revolution* to *Age of Extremes*, dazzles readers with the author's apparent fluency as he zigzags from First to Third World contexts'. Michael Burleigh, 'Eric Hobsbawm: A Believer in the Red Utopia to the Very End: The Grotesque Facts Never got in the Way of Eric Hobsbawm's Devotion to Communism', *The Telegraph,* 1 Oct. 2012, online at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/ 9579092/ Eric-Hobsbawm-A-believer-in-the-Red-utopia-to-the-very-end.html>, accessed 17 May 2019.

historical force for the whole world.[28] Actors in the non-European regions of the world come off badly in Hobsbawm's books. Moreover, a world orientation towards a European–American centre is not an outcome of the nineteenth century, but its starting point (AoR, 1–2). This clearly distinguishes Hobsbawm's approach to world history from the global history narratives that have had such great success in recent years.[29]

Hobsbawm's interpretation of the nineteenth century places modern capitalism at the centre of all considerations. Surprisingly, however, his work has found little resonance in the present renaissance of research on capitalism. We find occasional references to some of Hobsbawm's chapters,[30] but the debate about an analytical concept of capitalism is conducted with hardly any recourse to his work. This is clearly not because Hobsbawm did not explicitly problematize his concept of capitalism; others do not do this either, but are nevertheless recognized and discussed at great length in the research on capitalism.[31] This indeterminacy alone is therefore probably not the reason why Hobsbawm's trilogy on the long nineteenth century has been practically ignored by research on capitalism. The problem is more likely to be that Hobsbawm largely equated 'capitalism' with 'industrialism', which makes the concept of capitalism unnecessarily undifferentiated. Precisely this equation is being discussed and rejected in more recent approaches to research on capitalism.[32]

These points alone show that Hobsbawm's account of the nineteenth century is not only old, but in some respects outdated, and cannot contribute much to the current research discussions. This is not just to do with fashions and conventions, but also with the fact that in recent years and decades perspectives have been developed

[28] On this see also Jan Rüger, 'Britain, Empire, Europe: Re-reading Eric Hobsbawm', *Journal of Modern European History,* 11 (2013), 417–23.

[29] Christopher A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford, 2004); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York, 2015); Osterhammel, *Verwandlung*.

[30] James Fulcher, *Kapitalismus* (Stuttgart, 2011), 205–6.

[31] On this criticism see e.g. Peer Vries, 'Cotton, Capitalism, and Coercion: Some Comments on Sven Beckert's Empire of Cotton', *Journal of World History*, 28 (2017), 131–40.

[32] Among many others, Friedrich Lenger, 'Challenges and Promises of a History of Capitalism', *Journal of Modern European History*, 15 (2017), 470–9.

that have contributed significantly to the complexity of our view of the nineteenth century. We cannot fall behind these. Hobsbawm's work therefore no longer seems to me to be suitable as introductory reading for the history of the nineteenth century.[33]

Literature rather than Introduction

As literature, however, I thoroughly recommend Hobsbawm's history of the 'long nineteenth century'. In a lecture Hobsbawm himself once said: 'Obsolescence is the inevitable fate of historians; the only ones who survive it—a very rare occurrence—are those who were also significant writers: a Gibbon, a Macaulay, a Michelet. But today we have no control over who becomes a member of this tiny group. Only the future can decide that.'[34] I would include Hobsbawm in this group, not only because his books are beautifully written (a judgement tempered somewhat by the rather pedestrian German edition) and skilfully draw upon varied topics, regions, and analytical levels, not only because breaking up the large narrative through the inclusion of smaller stories, biographies, and details makes possible an exciting journey through the world of the nineteenth century (with all the limitations described). The position of the writer in these volumes is a particularly interesting aspect for the reader. Hobsbawm as the author wrote himself into all of them, so that not only is his incomparable hand recognizable everywhere, but also his specific perspective, his viewpoint (what Chladenius called a *Sehepunkt*). From the perspective of the early twenty-first century in particular, the volumes under review here can be read and experienced as products of the twentieth century, as the observations and interpretations of someone who stood firmly, with both feet, in the 'age of extremes'.

Hobsbawm began to reflect upon this himself, and in *The Age of Empire* he made it explicit. He begins the volume by describing how

[33] In his review of Hobsbawm's biography Niall Ferguson called the three volumes the 'best starting point I know for anyone who wishes to begin studying modern history'. Niall Ferguson, 'What a Swell Party it was . . . for him: Niall Ferguson Reviews Interesting Times by Eric Hobsbawm', *The Telegraph*, 22 Sept. 2002, online at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4728809/What-a-swell-party-it-was.-.-.-for-him.html>, accessed 27 Apr. 2019.
[34] Hobsbawm, 'Geschichtswissenschaft', 78.

his parents met in Alexandria before the First World War, illustrating how strongly the imperial age was intertwined with his own biography. According to Hobsbawm, the imperial age was a 'twilight zone between history and memory; between the past as a generalized record which is open to relatively dispassionate inspection and the past as a remembered part of, or background to, one's own life' (AoE, 3). For Hobsbawm's own present, this imperial age was still tangible: 'The world we live in is still very largely a world made by men and women who grew up in the period with which this volume deals, or in its immediate shadow' (AoE, 3). We could say that Hobsbawm conceived the imperial age as contemporary history in the sense of Hans Rothfels' 'age of living witnesses' ('Epoche der Mitlebenden'), or at least as a period in which the 'scholarly and the existential, archive and personal memory' overlapped, rubbed up against each other, supplemented, or contradicted each other (AoE, 3–5).

Even if he explicitly made this twilight zone only one feature of the 'imperial age', approaches to it can also be seen in the other volumes. For Hobsbawm, his own present began in the nineteenth century, when it was formed. And where this history at first sight seemed alien, it could be made comprehensible by finding parallels with times one had lived through, for example, by frequent comparisons with the history of the Spanish Civil War.[35] But this familiarity between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which Hobsbawm evokes has the opposite effect on today's readers. Not only the 'long nineteenth century', but also twentieth century that is so closely intertwined with it, seem far away. The distance between our present on the one hand, and both narrated and narrative time constantly grows. That is the special charm of reading these books.

Although Hobsbawm's trilogy is not an introduction to nineteenth-century history, it is a true classic, even if, in its own way, it has become a source in its own right.

[35] See e.g. the parallels he draws between Spain in the 1930s and France in 1794: 'The process which, during the Spanish Civil War of 1936–9, strengthened Communists at the expense of Anarchists, strengthened Jacobins of Saint-Just's stamp at the expense of Sansculottes of Hébert's' (AoR, 71).

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