

The Age of Empire by Eric John Hobsbawm

Reviewed by Pete Sweeney for SIS500 Professor Guy

Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour,
And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,
With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power,
To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping . . .

Rupert Brooke

I've extracted the content of this poem, which Hobsbawm quotes in *The Age of Empire*, because I respond to its pathos and because it seems a popular poem to quote among those who've tried to capture the state of mind of the pre-war European. For reasons that remain difficult to understand—although I believe there is much in our current political environment that corresponds to pre-War Europe—many Europeans apparently felt that World War I might end the paradoxical malaise they apparently felt during the *belle époque*; that at the apogee of their comfort and their power, \ they could speak disdainfully of “all the little emptiness of love.” And this war, and the causes of it, comprises the central concern of *The Age of Empire*. Hobsbawm's thesis is that World War I was caused by an unresolved and perhaps irresolvable paradox implicit in the foundations of the new bourgeois classes, in their governments, and in the “schizophrenia of the capitalist world economy” that provided them with a luxurious standard of living supported by systematic abuse of workers both in the core and in the periphery, a crisis that could only lead to a systemic conflict aggravated by technology, naïveté (as evidenced in the poem), and idiocy.

Hobsbawm remains an unrepentant communist, true enough, but it is unclear whether his version of communism ever corresponded with anyone else's. Unlike his once-fellow communist EP Thomson, Hobsbawm feels free enough to admit that the industrial revolution and its concomitant development of statist capitalism produced a sort of objective material progress for both rich and poor, albeit a disproportionate sort of improvement. “Even as Europeans died and fled in their millions,” he notes, “the survivors were becoming more numerous, taller, healthier, longer-lived. And most of them lived better.” While he feels quite free to criticize the abuses capitalism and imperialism visited on the poor and working classes, one wonders to what extent the anger of these classes was driven by improvements in their situation- that “moral statistics” that Hobsbawm cites such as improved literacy (not to mention the increased diffusion of advertising and entertainment media that projected images of unattainable products and lifestyles into the lives of the urban proletariat) might have caused workers to become more conscious of their suffering even as its objective quality was reduced by material advances.

The Age of Empire is full of counter-intuitives like this. Hobsbawm sees no need to package facts for a tidy ideology; he notes that some aspects of the Great Depression probably improved the bottom line of urban workers, who spent less on food, at the expense of farmers and farm laborers. As Hobsbawm takes the reader down a pleasurable if somewhat eerie survey of the world as it existed before riven by a mechanized world war of a kind that no one but perhaps American civil war soldiers had seen, he takes pleasure in pointing out flaws in both Marxist and anti-Marxist, imperialist and anti-imperialist analyses. Indeed, since I did not bother to read Hobsbawm's biography until finishing the work, it is clear to me that trying to read Hobsbawm as a purveyor of some party line is foolish. He makes many overt points about the world system as he perceives it then and now, but the thesis of his narrative is a bit more subtle and I'm not sure I completely perceive it, having failed to have read his *The Age of Capital* in which he presumably details the birth and life of the liberal petty capitalist system that he writes the epitaph for in *The Age of Empire*.

The work is well organized and flows in a more or less linear fashion, reset from time to time and from subject to subject. Hobsbawm has many interests and as an aesthete also holds forth on the history and significance of the "modernist" art movements, a fascinating chapter full of utterly subjective judgments about the quality and appeal of modernist art, alongside plenty of common-sense suggestions backed by hard data that illustrate how the art was indicative of the society behind it just as much as the trade statistics were. For example, I had always wondered why these art nouveau liquor advertising posters have been popping up in every poster shop. Hobsbawm's opinion of Art Nouveau's commercial appeal is illuminating: "Lacking aesthetic preconceptions, industry could recognize the revolutionary technology of building and the economy of a functional style . . . and business could see that *avant garde* techniques were effective in advertising. 'Modernist' criteria had practical value for industrial design and mechanized mass production."

For someone who is supposed to be a materialist, Hobsbawm clearly considers the study of the artistic product and issues of the time as relevant as his analysis of the economic and class factors coming into play; one wonders had communists like Hobsbawm been in charge, might Russian cooking have been preserved? What's more, Hobsbawm privileges the opinions of those there at the time: "Contemporaries . . . had no doubt that the crisis of the arts reflected the crisis of a society . . . which was, in one way or another, in the process of destroying the bases of its existence, the systems of value, convention and intellectual understanding which structured and ordered it."

Hobsbawm also discusses the revolutionary/independence movements of the time which occurred in the colonized countries. He takes a relatively brief tour through China, India, and Turkey, among others, stopping along the way to state that "it is roughly correct to make industry a criterion of modernity" and then positing that the Qing dynasty was therefore incapable of modernizing- and

therefore resisting imperialism- because its only claim to mandate lay in the conservation of tradition. Like Europe, China's weakness was an internal paradox. Along the way he drops a few horrible facts, stating that between nine and thirteen million Chinese died in the famines and floods that followed the crushing of the Taiping rebellion, and noting how Paraguay was "massacred" into returning to the folds of the world system's economy. But he does not view imperialism and colonialism as purely resource-extractive ventures; he notes that the majority of trade and investment, then as now, occurred between the developed economies; he also points out how many European countries took colonies that were economically useless to them and served only for national ego, or to redirect popular attention away from civil conflict. Imperialism as an antidote to civil war- or simple warfare as an antidote to civil war- is an established practice. Seward, Lincoln's Secretary of State, advocated a strategy of conquering Latin America as an antidote to the American Civil War and from Hobsbawm's perspective he could have been right. However, it was a temporary salve, since ultimately the fact that all the European powers had client states adjacent to one another, combined with the competitive economic and ego competition between the states, led to the development of inflexible interlocking alliances that made the World War inevitable, in Hobsbawm's view.

His description of the failure of the Young Turks to establish a European political system bears on his main thesis; he accuses the Young Turks of importing "the classic liberal constitution designed for bourgeois countries in which governments were not actually supposed to govern very much, since the affairs of society were in the hidden hands of a dynamic and self-regulating capitalist economy." Of course Hobsbawm's thesis is that European economies had ceased becoming self-regulating and instead become mixtures of state interference and private activity, that the hands-off laissez faire market economy composed primarily of small capitalists and entrepreneurs had been replaced by a system of ever-enlarging monopolies and concentrated conglomerates which relied heavily on the support of and interference by the state for their profits. But I'm not sure Hobsbawm clearly demonstrates (in this work) why parliamentary democracies required a self-regulating market for viability, or why they failed in the absence of one. Indeed, from time to time Hobsbawm's economic analysis doesn't seem compelling to me. He builds and burns a sort of "comparative advantage" straw man by asserting that there is little more to the theory than an idealistic idea of trade specialization unconcerned with the issue of factor mobility. This may be a fair assessment of some of the more naïve free traders then, but then again charges of economic naïveté can also be leveled against almost all the economic theories of the day, including the labor theory of value.

Indeed, it is sometimes difficult to perceive how unsympathetic Hobsbawm is to liberal capitalism since he blames so much on the integration of capitalism with state control, something Smith and the monetarists abhorred. For example, he takes trouble to note the inconsistent effect of protectionist

policies, which worked in some places and not in others, and goes on to assert that protectionism led to colonialism, which he asserts was at least partly driven by a search for *markets*, not for resources- and in this it is instructive to read of early British traders who fancied selling boxes of tacks to millions of Chinese. “The economic motive for acquiring some colonial territory becomes difficult to disentangle from the political action required for the purposes,” he says, “for protectionism of whatever kind is economy operating with the aid of politics.” He quotes a British diplomat: “If you were not such persistent protectionists, you would not find us so keen to annex territories.”

However, I am not sure Hobsbawm clearly explains what it was, exactly, about the strategic integration of the alliance blocs that made the system so inflexible. He largely attributes the advent of World War I on Germany’s decision to back Austria instead of refusing to take the “irrelevant” (irrelevant to what? one asks) assassination of their crown prince seriously. But this implies a flawed diplomatic decision *exacerbated* by systemic error, not caused by it. He points out that European leadership had tolerated assassinations before without mobilizing en masse. Elsewhere he asserts that Germany was not consciously trying to supercede the English navy, and he quotes a German admiral who claimed that Germany had no naval war plan to attack the English fleet. While he makes it clear that Europeans had no clear idea of the mess they were wading into, this does not automatically support the assertion that there was no way around the mess. However, it is not central to his point, which is that there was so much political dynamite laying about that it would have been very hard for Europe not to accidentally detonate it at some point. His quotations from the various Europeans who appeared both resigned to and excited by the prospect of modern war indicate that there were few inclined to douse what sparks were flying.

Hobsbawm’s approach does coordinate, to an extent, with Wallerstien’s theories of core and periphery; Hobsbawm agrees there was a system for establishing political dominance and economic dependence in the colonies, but takes some apparent exceptions to the quality of it and the importance of it. The problems of Europe were caused not by imperialism per se, but by the structure and development of the bourgeois classes- not by the agrarian revolution. Where Wallerstien has the long 16th century, Hobsbawm posits a long 19th century. While Hobsbawm’s thesis is intimately connected to the failure of this class to deliver social justice, to dampen nationalism and recidivism, and to avoid war, I am still not clear on what his precise vision of the class is. He does a good job of illustrating their lives and social challenges, and of painting a world of pointless secular comfort that confined middle class women to the home, surrounded by batteries of female servants.

He does hold this class responsible for leading the world into war, which is fairly well-supported, but he also notes that the working classes who were supposed to mobilize behind the Internationale apparently rallied behind the flags of their various countries. This too can be blamed on the

bourgeoisie, but I do not believe Hobsbawm is really interested in moral condemnation of them so much as a sympathetic sort of scorn for their loss of contact with reality. He asserts that the war was not widely perceived as good for business, despite the profits and influence of the arms industries; the attraction of war, he posits, was a vague pan-European “hope of something different” combined with a bogeyman Hobsbawm attacks elsewhere: nationalism. Also Hobsbawm asserts a degree of craziness inherent in the environment: “This was consequently the moment when governments, intellectuals, and businessmen discovered the political significance of irrationality.” But this is- to an extent- a psychological argument with the weaknesses thereof. Hobsbawm puts the continent on the couch, but to what extent do we trust the arts and anecdotes as indicative of the irrationality implicit in the decision? I personally am very much inclined to accept his view, however, but I admit it is because they resonate with my personal contemporary experience of modern American politics.

On the other hand, I suspect his views on the influence of religion on the process, which he generally leaves vague except for when he is attributing an outsize influence to the Catholic Church that it might well have lost in every nation except for Ireland. He is occasionally sympathetic to it when it supports women’s rights and a degree of religious cosmopolitanism, but I find it impossible to understand or explain Fascist Spain using his views of Catholicism. As for Protestants, they appear as a nameless, undifferentiated mash.

In summary, I profoundly enjoyed the work, both for its readability, quotability, and integration of the human with more objective analysis of economic and political forces. Hobsbawm’s picture may be flawed, but it at least aspires to an integrated view of causes in which both rational and irrational motives have both intended and unintended effects. In its views and concerns, and in its theories, *The Age of Empire* also seems the most immediately relevant to our current situation.