



ERIC HOBSBAWM

1. Eric Hobsbawm was a prominent 20th-century historian renowned for his contributions to Marxist historiography, social and labour history, nationalism, revolution, and the development of modern capitalism. He shifted focus from rulers and governments to broad economic and social transformations, emphasising the experiences of everyday people.
2. Hobsbawm was deeply influenced by Karl Marx and joined the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1936. Marxism provided him with both an intellectual framework and motivation for his historical pursuits. His approach focused on class relations, conflicts, changes in production methods, industrialisation, capitalism, labour movements, social and economic structures, revolutions, and political shifts- highlighting the connection between economic transformations and political institutions. However, Hobsbawm's view of history went beyond economic determinism, as he also incorporated politics, culture, nationalism, popular movements, and social structures into a broad analysis of historical change.
3. Hobsbawm's notable contribution was emphasising the "history from below" approach, which traditionally centred on kings, governments, wars, and elites. He and other British Marxist historians instead focused on workers, peasants, rebels, labourers, and marginalised groups as active agents in history. For Hobsbawm, ordinary people were not just victims of historical events; their collective efforts and responses to economic shifts significantly influenced history. This viewpoint profoundly impacted the evolution of modern social and labour history.

4. Hobsbawm's main idea is the Dual Revolution, which he considers as shaping the 19th-century world through two interconnected changes: the French Revolution of 1789, which transformed politics, citizenship, nationalism, and ideas of equality; and the Industrial Revolution in Britain, which altered production, capitalism, class relations, urbanisation, and the economy. These two revolutions together created a 'dual revolution' that laid down the core political and socio-economic structures of the modern era. This concept is key to understanding the Age of Revolution in Europe, from 1789 to 1848.
5. Hobsbawm is renowned for four major works exploring modern history and revolutions, especially during 1789–1848, focusing on the French and industrial revolutions. His book "The Age of Capital" examines the rise of industrial capitalism and empire between 1875 and 1914, highlighting imperialism, nationalism, and global capitalism. The third volume, "The Age of Extremes" (1914–1991), covers wars, fascism, communism, capitalism, and significant 20th-century upheavals. These works reflect Hobsbawm's idea of "total history," which integrates economic, political, social, and cultural changes rather than isolating them.
6. Hobsbawm introduced an influential way of dividing modern history into periods. Instead of seeing the 19th century as simply 1800 - 1900, he extends the 'long 19th century' from 1789 to 1914, starting with the French Revolution and ending with the start of World War I. This span begins with revolutionary change and concludes when the First World War upsets the European political and social order of the previous century. His method emphasises that historical periods should be characterised by major structural shifts rather than just by calendar dates.
7. Similarly, * The Age of Extremes* views 1914 - 1991 as a continuous historical period. The timeline spans from 1914 to 1991, covering events like the First World War and the fall of the Soviet Union. Hobsbawm divided this era into several broad phases: the Age of Catastrophe (1914 - 1945), characterised by world wars,

economic depression, fascism, and political crises; the Golden Age (c. 1945 - 1973), marked by rapid economic growth, the expansion of welfare states, and major social change; and the Landslide/Crisis decades (post-1973), characterised by economic instability, transformations in capitalism, and the weakening of traditional political and social structures. The collapse of the Soviet bloc signifies the end of his "short 20th century. "

8. Another significant contribution is found in 'The Invention of Tradition' (1983), edited by Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. It introduces the idea that traditions claimed to be ancient and continuous may actually be recent inventions. Governments, monarchies, nationalist movements, and institutions can create rituals, symbols, and ceremonies and present them as part of a continuous historical legacy. The 'basic formula' involves a new practice followed by ritualisation, the appearance of antiquity, and legitimacy. This concept has been particularly influential in the studies of nationalism, national identity, and political symbolism.
9. Hobsbawm significantly contributed to modern nationalism theories, especially in 'Nations and Nationalism since 1780.' He argued that nations should be seen as timeless, organic communities. However, he viewed modern nationalism as linked to modern states, capitalism, mass politics, education, political institutions, and constructed traditions. His perspective aligns with the modernist view of nationalism, emphasising how nationalism often transforms diverse populations into a unified, imagined national community.
10. Hobsbawm explored forms of popular resistance often overlooked in traditional political theory histories. Notable works include "Primitive Rebels" (1959) and "Bandits" (1969). He introduced the notable concept of "social banditry," where a social bandit is an outlaw labelled a criminal by the state or dominant classes but seen by some peasants as a protector, avenger, or symbol of justice. This perspective shows that, while the state views such figures as criminals, the local populations may view them as heroes or rebels. Through this framework,

Hobsbawm sought to interpret pre-modern and peasant resistance as meaningful social protests rather than mere criminal acts.

11. Labour history was a core focus for Hobsbawm. Instead of solely studying formal labour organisations, he explored the development of working-class structures and wider popular activities. His method linked labour history to industrial capitalism, class formation, trade unions, working-class consciousness, popular protests, and economic change. This approach advanced labour history beyond just the institutional histories of unions and parties.
12. Hobsbawm played a key role in founding the influential journal *Past and Present* in 1952, which was established by both Marxist and non-Marxist historians. The journal was significant for integrating economic history, social history, Marxist theory, comparative history, and the influence of the *Annales School*. It contributed to a shift in British historical scholarship by promoting the study of social structures behind political events.
13. Hobsbawm is frequently analysed alongside E.P. Thompson, another prominent British Marxist historian. A useful distinction is that Hobsbawm focused on macro history, specifically on capitalism, industrialisation, global changes, economic structures, and long-term historical periods. In contrast, Thompson emphasised lived class experience and developed consciousness. Both historians played crucial roles in shifting historical writing toward the perspectives of ordinary people and social history.
14. Hobsbawm's strongest trait was his skill in integrating various levels of historical explanation. His work links the economy to class, society, politics, ideology, nationalism, and global changes. Rather than viewing political events in isolation, he investigated the underlying social and economic shifts that enabled them. He also emphasised the importance of comparative and international history over a narrow focus on single nations.

15. Hobsbawm's lifelong commitment to Marxism and his ongoing membership in the communist party were highly debated aspects of his intellectual career. He remained in the party even after many other British Marxist historians left in the wake of the 1956 crises. Critics argue that his Marxist perspective sometimes placed too much emphasis on class and economic structures, neglecting cultural, gender, and identity-based explanations. His political affiliation with communism further complicated assessments of his interpretation of Soviet history. Despite this, his historical work continued to be influential beyond Marxist historiography.

16. Major works -

- The Age of Revolution (1962) is dual revolution
- The Age of Capital (1975) means capitalist expansion
- The Age of Empire (1987) such as imperialism and nationalism
- The Age of Extremes (1994) where short 20th century
- Primitive Rebels (1959) such as popular/archaic social movements
- Bandits (1969) such as social banditry
- 'The Invention of Tradition' (1983, edited with Terence Ranger) explores the concept of constructed traditions.
- Nations and Nationalism since 1780 (1990), including the modernist interpretation of nationalism.

17. Eric Hobsbawm transformed modern historiography by examining revolution, capitalism, and nationalism through a Marxist 'history from below' approach. He interpreted the modern world using broad concepts such as the Dual Revolution, invented traditions, and the long 19th century/short 20th centuries.

ERIC HOBSBAWM

(1917–2012)

MARXIST HISTORIAN OF MODERN WORLD

Eric Hobsbawm was one of the most influential historians of the twentieth century, known for his Marxist interpretation of history, focus on social and economic change, and the experiences of ordinary people.



Born
9 June 1917
Alexandria, Egypt



Nationality
British



Political Affiliation
Member of the
Communist Party
of Great Britain
(1936 onwards)



Died
1 October 2012
London, UK

1 INTELLECTUAL ORIENTATION

- Deeply influenced by Karl Marx.
- History shaped by class relations, mode of production and economic structures.
- Focus on the relationship between economy, politics, society, culture and ideas.
- Not mechanical determinism—incorporated politics, culture, nationalism and human agency.

2 HISTORY FROM BELOW

- Emphasized the experiences and struggles of ordinary people—workers, peasants, labourers, rebels and marginalized groups.
- People are not just passive victims; their collective actions shape history.
- Helped build the fields of social history and labour history.

3 THE DUAL REVOLUTION

He argued that the modern world was shaped by two interconnected revolutions in the 19th century:

- French Revolution (1789)** – transformed politics, citizenship, nationalism and ideas of equality.
- Industrial Revolution (in Britain)** – transformed production, capitalism, class relations and economic life.

→ Together they formed the “Dual Revolution”, the foundation of the modern world.

4 THE AGE TETRALOGY

His four-volume history of the modern world:

Book	Period	Central Theme
The Age of Revolution (1962)	1789–1848	French & Industrial Revolutions
The Age of Capital (1975)	1848–1875	Rise of industrial capitalism
The Age of Empire (1987)	1875–1914	Imperialism, nationalism and global capitalism
The Age of Extremes (1994)	1914–1991	Wars, fascism, communism, capitalism in 20th century

→ A ‘total history’ connecting economic, political, social and cultural developments.

5 LONG 19TH CENTURY & SHORT 20TH CENTURY

- Long 19th Century:** 1789 (French Revolution) to 1914 (First World War)
- Short 20th Century:** 1914 (WWI) to 1991 (Collapse of the Soviet Union)

He divided the short 20th century into:

- Age of Catastrophe (1914–1945)** – Wars, depression, fascism
- Golden Age (1945–1973)** – Growth, welfare state, social change
- Crisis / Landslide decades (after 1973)** – Economic instability and decline of old systems

6 INVENTION OF TRADITION

- Explained how traditions that appear ancient are actually modern creations.
- Established through repetition, symbols, rituals and ceremonies.
- Formula: New practice → Repeated ritual → Appearance of antiquity → Legitimacy.
- Important for understanding nationalism and state formation.

7 NATIONALISM

- Modern nationalism is linked with modern states, capitalism, mass politics, education and institutions.
- Nations are not timeless; they are politically constructed communities.
- Contributed to the modernist theory of nationalism.

8 SOCIAL BANDITRY

- Studied popular resistance in pre-modern societies.
- Concept of “social bandit” – Outlaw for the state, but a hero or protector for the people.
- Major works: *Primitive Rebels* (1959) and *Bandits* (1969).

9 LABOUR & WORKING-CLASS HISTORY

- Focus on development of working-class organizations, trade unions and class consciousness.
- Connected labour history with industrial capitalism, protest movements and social change.

10 PAST & PRESENT

- Closely associated with the founding of the journal *Past & Present* (1952).
- Brought together economic history, social history, Marxist analysis and comparative history.
- Helped transform British historical scholarship.

11 MAJOR CRITICISM

- Overemphasis on class and economic structures.
- Less attention to culture, gender and identity.
- Controversy over his continued association with communism.



“The task of the historian is to recover the past as a meaningful human experience.”
– Eric Hobsbawm

12 MAJOR WORKS TO REMEMBER



The Age of Revolution (1962)



The Age of Capital (1975)



The Age of Empire (1987)



The Age of Extremes (1994)



Primitive Rebels (1959)



Bandits (1969)



The Invention of Tradition (1983)



Nations and Nationalism since 1780 (1990)



ONE-LINE CONCLUSION

Eric Hobsbawm transformed modern historiography by interpreting revolution, capitalism, class and nationalism through a Marxist “history from below,” while explaining the modern world through sweeping concepts like the Dual Revolution, invented traditions, and the long nineteenth and short twentieth centuries.

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