



ARTICLE

Interpreting Eric Hobsbawm's History of the *Fin de Siècle* 'Twilight Zone'

Mark Hearn 

Department of History and Archaeology, Macquarie University, Australia
Email: mark.hearn@mq.edu.au

Abstract

Eric Hobsbawm's account of the *fin de siècle* of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and its post-First World War aftermath, raises the questions of how historians place themselves autobiographically in their histories, and how personal history informs their interpretations. A focus on the *fin de siècle* reveals Hobsbawm exploring a cultural social democracy as an alternative to the market capitalism that provided the turbulent dynamics tipping towards twentieth-century catastrophe. From the past Hobsbawm offered the people of his present potential alternative models of a more politically harmonious and culturally richer future, a story in which he placed himself. Elements of Hobsbawm's life story emerge in his histories and autobiography, highlighting the personal significance of memory and material objects that Hobsbawm retained – family photos, a school atlas, and his copy of Karl Kraus's *Last days of humanity* – reflecting an enduring presence of the past that Hobsbawm drew attention to in his work, and helping to shape significant narratives in Hobsbawm's response to the lost realm of *fin de siècle* Vienna; a 'twilight zone', in Hobsbawm's description of that pre-war world, 'still part of us, but no longer quite within our personal reach'.

For all of us there is a twilight zone between history and memory...there is always such a no-man's land of time. It is by far the hardest part of history for historians, or for anyone else, to grasp. For the present writer, born towards the end of the First World War of parents who were, respectively, aged thirty-three and nineteen in 1914, the Age of Empire falls into this twilight zone.¹

Eric Hobsbawm's account of the *fin de siècle* of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the post-First World War aftermath of that turbulent period, raises important questions about how historians place themselves autobiographically in their histories and shape their interpretations. As a

¹ Eric Hobsbawm, *The age of empire* (London, 2002), p. 3.

child in post-war Vienna, Hobsbawm was conscious of living with parents and extended family unwilling to sever an emotional bond with the pre-1914 world, and perhaps shaping Hobsbawm's first conception of historical memory: 'At bottom my Viennese family found any other way of life than that before 1914 inconceivable, and carried on with it, against the odds.'² Hobsbawm was born in Alexandria in 1917, the son of a British male of anglicized Jewish background, Leopold 'Percy' Hobsbaum, and a younger Viennese Jewish woman, Nelly Grün. The family soon returned to Vienna, and the 'twilight zone' of history and memory, both for Hobsbawm and the Habsburg empire, which was vanishing as he was born: 'still part of us, but no longer quite within our personal reach'.³

The interpretative intervention that Hobsbawm intended by reference to the twilight zone was indicated in the 'Overture' of *The age of empire*: tracing how the twentieth century 'has been shaped by the era which led up to the First World War'.⁴ Exploring this significant legacy was rendered more potent for its emotional and personal meaning; there is nothing like a sense of loss for stimulating an awareness of the past, and a sense of loss seemed to intensify as Hobsbawm grew older. Hobsbawm periodically returned to reflections on the *fin de siècle* and his post-Habsburg experience later in life; many of the works cited in this article post-date publication of *The age of empire*. This preoccupation was not entirely driven by the personal dimension, only that for Hobsbawm the personal dimension sharpened his interest. It is Hobsbawm himself who draws attention to that personal dimension, in a range of works discussed below.

Exploring Hobsbawm's metaphorical twilight zone provides new insights into the nature and purpose of the historical texts, and autobiographical reflections, composed by one of the seminal historians of the modern era, a scholar working from a Marxist perspective and driven by, as Roy Foster noted in an obituary for Hobsbawm, an 'omnivorous appetite for investigating multiple levels of social experience with the tools of economics and sociology', and who also displayed an 'Olympian' command of cultural history.⁵ Hobsbawm was the author of a wide range of 'now classic works' – the *Age* sequence of *revolution*, *capital*, *empire*, and *extremes*; *Industry and empire*; a number of studies of nationalism, notably *The invention of tradition* and *Nations and nationalism*; and the exploration of 'social bandits' that Hobsbawm introduced with *Primitive rebels* and *Bandits*: a prodigious yield that exerted a 'global impact' and which generated sales of literally millions of copies.⁶

Scholarly analysis of historians' autobiographies has naturally focused on dedicated monographs, including Hobsbawm's *Interesting times*.⁷ Rocío G. Davis

² Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting times: a twentieth century life* (London, 2003), pp. 16, 17.

³ Hobsbawm, *The age of empire*, p. 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

⁵ Roy Foster, 'Eric Hobsbawm', *Obituary, Past & Present*, 218 (2013), pp. 3–15, at p. 7.

⁶ Neal Ascherson, 'Eric Hobsbawm: a life in history by Richard J Evans', review, *Guardian*, 10 Feb. 2019, www.theguardian.com/books/2019/feb/10/eric-hobsbawm-life-in-history-richard-j-evans-review, accessed 26 June 2019.

⁷ Hobsbawm, *Interesting times*.

argued that historians' autobiographies 'are highly performative – they *construct* as they *recount*. Can scholarly work, viewed from the perspective of its author's life story, be therefore perceived as a performative act, rather than as primarily objective analysis?'⁸ Hobsbawm's reflections on his personal relationship with the past, this performative construction, infiltrated widely across his published work, and has been recalled in television and internet documentaries devoted to his life and historical practice, notably the BBC Four *Arena* programme *Eric Hobsbawm: the stories my country told me* (1996), discussed below. Historians including Hobsbawm, Jaume Aurell argues, have 'chosen life-writing not only to tell personal or academic stories...[but] to make history by revealing their epistemological beliefs and commitments. Thus these personal testimonies become not only conventional autobiographies but also valid history, the historical artifacts that they really are.'⁹ For Hobsbawm, the *fin de siècle* provided a consistent reference point for the insertion of himself in his historical narratives, linked to a conception that this historical moment provided a crucial unleashing of creative energy and political mobilization that exerted a profound if destabilizing influence over the subsequent twentieth century. His own story was sourced in that instability, and consciousness of this childhood immersion was reflected in the ambiguity of tense and time that he expressed of his early life in a 2004 interview. 'I grew up living under a volcano which was in the middle of erupting. In a world which had gone to bits, which had been a field of ruins in World War 1.'¹⁰

Eric Hobsbawm's account of the *fin de siècle* and its post-First World War aftermath provides a narrative path for exploring how personal history informs the interpretations of historians and the construction of historical texts. Elements of Hobsbawm's life story function as performative constructs in his histories and autobiography, emerging in narration and by highlighting the personal significance of memory and material objects that Hobsbawm retained, reflecting an enduring presence of the past that Hobsbawm drew attention to: family photos, a school atlas, and his copy of Karl Kraus's *Last days of humanity* helped to construct Hobsbawm's response to *fin de siècle* Vienna; the 'world which had gone to bits'. Hobsbawm's memories of childhood in post-Habsburg Vienna, and his various references to Kraus's mordant commentary on the empire's collapse, functioned, as Eelco Runia observes, as 'monuments...forcefully "presenting an absence" in the here and now', at once familiar and challenging, and stimulating the experience of presence.¹¹ Runia argues that

The need for presence may be said to be the existential equivalent of one of the key issues in history and for historiography: the problem of

⁸ Rocío G. Davis 'Introduction: academic autobiography and/in the discourses of history', *Rethinking History*, 13 (2009), pp. 1–4, at pp. 2–3.

⁹ Jaume Aurell, 'Making history by contextualizing oneself: autobiography as historiographical intervention', *History and Theory*, 54 (2015), pp. 244–68, at p. 246.

¹⁰ Richard Cohen, *Making history: the storytellers who shaped the past* (New York, NY, 2022), p. 381.

¹¹ Eelco Runia, *Moved by the past: discontinuity and historical mutation* (New York, NY, 2014), pp. 59, 68.

continuity and discontinuity...It is a symptom of the determination to account for the fact that our past – though irremediably gone – may feel more real than the world we inhabit.¹²

The *fin de siècle* stimulated a past that remained present for Hobsbawm, forming his search for meaning as an historian, and not least for the forces that shaped the history of the period 1875–1914, *The age of empire*, the third of his four-volume world history survey from the dual revolutions to the fall of the Soviet Union: ‘the world we live in is still very largely a world made by men and women who grew up in the period’, including those ‘significant’ in the field of culture and ‘the formation of modern thought’.¹³ In *The age of empire* and a number of subsequent essays, Hobsbawm focused on the richly creative Viennese of the period, including Sigmund Freud and Karl Kraus, Arnold Schoenberg and Gustav Mahler, or in England, Eleanor Marx, William Morris, and Edward Carpenter.¹⁴ Across his work, and particularly in later essays and talks, Hobsbawm emphasized a linkage between Marxism, social democrats, and the cultural avant-garde of the *fin de siècle* striving to create a better world. This sympathetic pluralism may seem to stand in contrast with Hobsbawm’s identification as a communist. Commentators have reflected upon Hobsbawm’s precocious affiliation with communism. Richard Cohen recently represented Hobsbawm as the ‘red historian’, whose teenage embrace of the communist cause provided Hobsbawm with ‘an almost ecstatic sense of identity’.¹⁵ Hobsbawm’s biographer Richard Evans also suggested that communism offered the orphaned fifteen-year-old ‘identity and belonging’.¹⁶ Jeremy Popkin dates Hobsbawm’s ideological origin moment to arrival in Berlin in 1931, and his decision to join the Communist Party.¹⁷

The roots of the idealism that led to the communist cause seemed to pre-date the 1930s, and it is notable that it is in discussing the heterogeneous nature of *fin de siècle* socialist and progressive activism that Hobsbawm cultivated a less politically sectarian and ideological narrow perspective, a tendency evident in the later essays and the autobiography, *Interesting times*. Towards the end of his life in 2012, two book projects collected together essays new and old on familiar preoccupations. *How to change the world* offered ‘tales of Marx and Marxism’ for a world rocked by the Global Financial Crisis; one of the longest essays in the collection was devoted to ‘The influence of Marxism 1880–1914’, which, as discussed below, proved to be a lively cultural history survey of the contribution to creativity and reform issues of a range of creative non-Marxists – in *fin de siècle* Vienna, the Arts and Crafts culture in Britain, and

¹² Eelco Runia, ‘Presence’, *History and Theory*, 45 (2006), pp. 1–29, at pp. 5–6.

¹³ Hobsbawm, *The age of empire*, p. 3.

¹⁴ For example see *ibid.*, pp. 206–7, 230–7, 272.

¹⁵ Cohen, *Making history*, p. 380.

¹⁶ Richard J. Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: a life in history* (London, 2019), pp. 30–44.

¹⁷ Jeremy Popkin, *History, historians, and autobiography* (Chicago, IL, 2005), pp. 209–11; see also Alex Callinicos, ‘The drama of revolution and reaction: Marxist history and the twentieth century’, in Chris Wickham, ed., *Marxist history-writing for the twenty-first century* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 169–71.

elsewhere in Europe.¹⁸ The essays in *Fractured times* reflected upon ‘culture and society in the twentieth century’ although there was a preoccupation with the history and culture of *fin de siècle* Vienna, Art Nouveau and ‘Mitteleuropa’. Richard Evans described *Fractured times* as ‘a requiem for a vanished world’.¹⁹ *Fractured times* was no more a forlorn elegy than *How to change the world*. A focus on the *fin de siècle* reveals Hobsbawm exploring an inclusive cultural social democracy as an alternative to the market capitalism that provided the turbulent dynamics tipping towards twentieth-century catastrophe. From the past, Hobsbawm offered the people of his present potential alternative models of a more politically harmonious and culturally richer future, a story in which he placed himself.

I

Hobsbawm narrated the past through an engagement with the evidence of the *fin de siècle*, and his memories, that is, his imaginative reconstruction, of his family’s immersion in the absence of the pre-war order that had constituted their lives. ‘Memory is not so much a reliving or re-activating of past experiences as a reconfiguring and re-interpreting of that experience.’²⁰ Hobsbawm’s childhood and early adolescence were firstly spent in post-Habsburg Vienna, and then in the last years of Weimar Berlin before the Nazi accession to power in 1933. The move to the German capital was compelled by the death of his parents. Hobsbawm cultivated a narrative of his early life in a Europe that had plunged into the ‘age of catastrophe’ – Hobsbawm’s description – of the First World War and the subsequent twentieth century. This narration relied upon analysis infused with personal memory. Stefan Berger argues that memory is ‘unthinkable without narrativity and emplotment’.²¹ Material objects may play a role in triggering memory, generating a sense of the past that is often powerfully personal. Observing the increased focus in recent decades by historians of the study of material culture, Berger argues that ‘things themselves possess agency – through their materiality they create and shape experiences and are involved in constructing identities’.²²

Eelco Runia suggests that this task may be approached by focusing on the ‘presence’ of the past, which emerges from an instinctive response to past memory, or material objects associated with the past, rather than the accounts provided in historians’ texts. “Presence”, in my view, is “being in touch” – either literally or figuratively – with people, things, events, and feelings that made you into the person you are.”²³ Runia argues that ‘the presence of the past does not primarily reside in the intended story...but in what story and text contain in spite of the intentions of the historian. One might say that

¹⁸ Eric Hobsbawm, *How to change the world: tales of Marx and Marxism* (London, 2011).

¹⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, *Fractured times: culture and society in the twentieth century* (London, 2013); Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm*, p. 639.

²⁰ Stefan Berger, *History and identity* (Cambridge, 2022), p. 153.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 253.

²³ Runia, ‘Presence’, p. 5.

historical reality travels with historiography not as a paying passenger but as a stowaway.²⁴

How do claims of ‘presence’ and the elusive recalls of memory reconcile with Hobsbawm’s empirical constructivism? Keith Jenkins and Alun Munslow described Hobsbawm as ‘a constructionist of the political left’, repudiating postmodernism and the linguistic turn, and anchoring his ‘antagonism to epistemological scepticism on “the supremacy of the evidence”’.²⁵ Jenkins and Munslow defined the constructionist approach to history as ‘animated by a complex and self-reflexive, yet still basically objective, empirical methodology. No matter what ontological assumptions are made about the nature of the past or the historian’s experience of the present, constructionist historians...desire to maintain the distance between themselves and the past.’²⁶ Hobsbawm subtly collapsed this distance, in both narrative, and narrative invocation of material object. Despite Hobsbawm’s insistence on evidential supremacy, he acknowledged that ‘history is an imaginative art’.²⁷ Hobsbawm’s narratives included an imaginative recreation of *his* presence in ‘The age of catastrophe’. Representations of ‘catastrophe’ populate his work and in particular his narratives of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including the time and space of his key world histories, *The age of empire* (first published in 1987) and *The age of extremes* (first published in 1994; Part one is specifically characterized as ‘The age of catastrophe’).²⁸ Alex Callinicos observed the autobiographical nature of *The age of extremes*, an historical narrative of ‘the short twentieth century’ 1914–94 that paralleled Hobsbawm’s life: ‘this proximity to Hobsbawm’s own personal experience and political investments is expressed in the construction of the book’s argument’: from catastrophe to a brief post-Second World War ‘golden age’ of economic prosperity and social stability, to the ‘landslide’ that characterized the post-Cold War world – rampant ‘demographic growth, ecological destruction’, and the global rise of neo-liberalism unrestrained, as a consequence of the collapse of the Soviet Union, by any ‘external pressure on Western capitalism to reform itself’.²⁹ Of *The age of extremes*, Hobsbawm acknowledged that he wrote it not only as a scholar, but as a ‘participant observer’. Observing that ‘I have lived through almost all of the most extraordinary and terrible century in human history’, Hobsbawm claimed that he brought both an historian’s rigour and ‘the passion that belongs to the age of extremes’ to his narrative task.³⁰

II

In his autobiography, Hobsbawm pointed out that the British Marxist historians and scholars of his generation – Christopher Hill, E. P. Thompson,

²⁴ Ibid., p. 27.

²⁵ Keith Jenkins and Alun Munslow, eds., *The nature of history reader* (London, 2004), pp. 66–7.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 11.

²⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, ‘On history’, in *ibid.*, p. 68.

²⁸ Hobsbawm, *The age of empire*; Eric Hobsbawm, *The age of extremes* (London, 2007).

²⁹ Callinicos, ‘The drama of revolution and reaction’, p. 169.

³⁰ Hobsbawm, *Interesting times*, p. xiii.

Raymond Williams – very often began with a passion for literature rather than economics, adding ‘my own Marxism developed as an attempt to understand the arts’.³¹ Roy Foster noted that ‘the cultural “turn” in [Hobsbawm’s] later work became pronounced’.³² This cultural turn often found expression through his interest in the *fin de siècle*.

Although Hobsbawm was often characterized as an economic or political historian, this cultural turn was already evident across the chapters of *The age of empire* and reflected in a sustained engagement with the artistic developments, and the scientific and intellectual dynamics of a period that Hobsbawm described in the Overture as ‘crucial in the development of modern culture’.³³ The arts reflected an ‘identity crisis’; old certainties of style and meaning ‘lost their bearings’ as a welter of innovations emerged, evident in new forms of artistic expression and personal identity: ‘the New English Arts Club (1886), Art Nouveau and the *Neue Zeit*’; the ‘new woman’ that confronted male privilege and social convention was embodied in emancipatory reformers and radicals such as Beatrice Webb and Annie Besant, Emma Goldman and Rosa Luxemburg. The spring-time symbolism of May Day demonstrations suggested a future that ‘belonged to socialism’.³⁴ Anxiety over degeneration and decadence also produced darker rationales: in the sciences, the racialized ideology of eugenics evolved from Darwinism and exerted a wide influence: ‘Eugenic themes occur in the ideological music of liberals, social reformers, Fabian socialists, some other sections of the left [movement for birth control].’³⁵ Hobsbawm argued that ‘the revolutionary transformation of the scientific world view in these years forms part of a more general, and dramatic, abandonment of established...values, truths and ways of looking at the world and structuring it conceptually’: an abandonment that reflected ‘a crisis generated by the contradictions of Progress, which seemed as Nietzsche suggested, to contain the seeds of its own irrationalism and breakdown’.³⁶ Irrationalism and questioning of established beliefs triggered a popularity of Eastern mysticism and the occult in the late nineteenth century: ‘The unknown and incomprehensible became more popular than they had been since the early romantic era.’³⁷ The tension between *fin de siècle* culture and emerging modernist avant-garde forms was resolved in the first decade of the twentieth century, Hobsbawm argued, with a ‘visible break’ that saw cultural modernism established in the ‘last few years before 1914’.³⁸

It is not difficult to understand why the *fin de siècle* age of empire might appeal to Hobsbawm. As Paul Greenhalgh observes of ‘the style and the age’ 1890–1914, ‘by the *fin de siècle*, history was a site of constant contention, a struggle to impose alternative visions of the past in order to gain control of

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

³² Foster, ‘Eric Hobsbawm’, p. 7.

³³ Hobsbawm, *The age of empire*, p. 6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 211–12, 219, 226–7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 253–4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 256, 258.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

the future'.³⁹ Hobsbawm's work reflected a fascination with the alternative visions that seemed to open new fields of political action, cultural expression, and personal liberation at the turn of the century, and as forces of industrialization and capital accumulation gathered in unprecedented reach and scale across the globe.⁴⁰ Industrialization concentrated the European urban working class and in the years 1870–1914 stimulated working-class participation in mass politics, often funnelled into identification with the nation: Hobsbawm argued that nationalism was 'transformed' in the period, when the term itself was coined.⁴¹ Nationalism's key modern forms were established in the period, when its familiar cultural 'traditions' were 'mass produced'.⁴²

The nature and time frame of the *fin de siècle* provides a compelling context to observe how historians negotiate the relationship between past and present, and expectations of the future.⁴³ At the turn into the twentieth century, Christopher Bayly described a '*fin de siècle* acceleration' that facilitated the rapid dissemination of new ideas, technologies, and the mass transfer of peoples.⁴⁴ Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst observed an intensive 'epoch of endings and beginnings', whose accelerations generated anxiety and exhaustion at the rate of change, and desire to return to a romanticized past to escape the threat of degeneration.⁴⁵ Carl Schorske memorably placed *fin de siècle* Vienna at the centre of these turbulent dynamics.⁴⁶ As this article identifies, Hobsbawm often returned to the period and reflected upon its influence over the course of twentieth century, including the impact of Vienna and the fallen Habsburg empire on his own life and perceptions of history; a mingling of the personal and professional, subjective response and objective analysis. Jeremy Popkin has noted the instability of autobiography, 'in terms of the postulated opposites between self and the world, literature and history, fact and fiction, subject and object'; autobiography is a 'dangerous double agent, moving between these oppositions', although it may function as a 'magical instrument of reconciliation'. Autobiographical memory 'is a creative artist', helping to make 'sense of experience and fashion coherent stories' from the chaos of the past.⁴⁷

³⁹ Paul Greenhalgh, 'The style and the age', in Paul Greenhalgh, ed., *Art Nouveau 1890–1914* (London, 2000), p. 22.

⁴⁰ Alfred Chandler, '*Fin de siècle* industrial transformation', in Mikulas Teich and Roy Porter, eds., *Fin de siècle and its legacy* (Cambridge, 1990).

⁴¹ Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 102.

⁴² Eric Hobsbawm, 'Mass producing traditions: Europe, 1870–1914', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The invention of tradition* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 267.

⁴³ Mark Hearn, 'The *fin de siècle* and the multiple temporalities of historical periodization', *Rethinking History*, 26 (2022), pp. 32–50.

⁴⁴ Christopher Bayly, *The birth of the modern world, 1780–1914* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 451, 456; see also Michael Saler, ed., *The fin de siècle world* (London, 2015).

⁴⁵ Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst, eds., *The fin de siècle: a reader in cultural history* (Oxford, 2000), p. xiii.

⁴⁶ Carl Schorske, *Fin de siècle Vienna* (New York, NY, 1981).

⁴⁷ Popkin, *History, historians, and autobiography*, pp. 12, 13.

III

In Hobsbawm's autobiographical account of a disrupted twentieth-century family history, and his birth in the context of collapse and the chaos of post-First World War Austria, the reader is immersed in the movement of two lives unexpectedly drawn together across disparate imperial and colonial settings to Egypt, then a protectorate of the British empire, where Leopold 'Percy' Hobsbaum, and Nelly Grün met and married, and to whom was born their son Eric in 1917. As we read the account presented in *The age of empire*, we are present in Hobsbawm's history – although not so much a story he is telling as a professional, but as a personal memory of an out of place connection.

Hobsbawm's own life was a product of a turbulent age of empire, and the chance meeting in colonial Egypt of a young Viennese woman seeking 'cultural self-improvement' who had travelled by steamer from then Habsburg Trieste, and a young Englishman 'representing a small part of the British Empire, namely the Egyptian Post and Telegraph Service', and who met in the Sporting Club on the outskirts of Alexandria. 'It is extremely improbable that such an encounter would have happened in such a place, or would have led to marriage between two such people, in any period of history earlier than the one in which this book deals.'⁴⁸

The family left Egypt for Vienna after the end of the war. On the first page of the 'Overture' of his autobiography, Hobsbawm reproduced a family photo taken in 1922, of 'five small children posed eighty years ago by adults on a terrace in Vienna, unaware (unlike the parents) that they are surrounded by the debris of defeat, ruined empires and economic collapse'. He began to realize that 'though the Habsburg Empire had gone, we still lived on its...pre-1914 assumptions'.⁴⁹ Hobsbawm's family refused to acknowledge their financial situation, although 'they were aware of how far they had fallen', forced into an 'impoverished' lifestyle far from their lives 'in peacetime – i.e. before 1914'. The family still employed a maid, although they could not afford to do so. 'Any other way of life' than the pre-1914 Habsburg world was 'inconceivable' for Hobsbawm's family.⁵⁰ Hobsbawm and his sister Nancy were forced to leave Vienna for Berlin following the death of their parents; Leonard died in 1929, and Nelly in 1931. Taken under the care of their father's brother Sidney, Eric Hobsbawm was immersed in the economic depression and political violence that preceded the Nazi accession of power. Richard Evans observes that for Hobsbawm, 'in Berlin, the economic catastrophe must have seemed like the end of the world'.⁵¹ The teenage Hobsbawm embraced the communist cause and sharpened his appreciation of history. Confronted by Nazi anti-Semitism, Sidney Hobsbaum decided that they should leave after Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor of Germany in 1933. Eric and Nancy found themselves settling with relatives in suburban England.⁵²

⁴⁸ Hobsbawm, *The age of empire*, pp. 2–3.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 17.

⁵¹ Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm*, p. 30.

⁵² Hobsbawm, *Interesting times*, pp. 76–7.

Hobsbawm's published work, and the material objects that he retained, reflect an historical consciousness already evolving before it found focus in the spectacle of a city collapsing towards Nazi rule. Just as Berlin loomed as significant, so Austria remained a vital presence in his narratives. In a 2008 essay, 'Memories of Weimar', Hobsbawm seamlessly blended the personal and historical in reflections on Weimar Germany:

With the fall of the Habsburg Empire it naturally absorbed the large surplus talent of what remained of Austria. Where would Weimar films be without Vienna, without Fritz Lang, G.W. Pabst, Wilder, Preminger or, for that matter, Peter Lorre? Its stable of stars – Conrad Veidt, Emil Jannings, Marlene Dietrich, Elisabeth Bergner – were trained under the Viennese Max Reinhardt, the chief influence on the German-language theatre business. In Berlin my family, themselves migrants from Vienna, went on living a social life largely centred on other Austrian expatriate relatives and friends.⁵³

Hobsbawm's stress on Austria as a wellspring of creativity in Weimar culture drew from an appreciation of the heritage of the multi-cultural, multi-lingual, and multi-territorial Habsburg empire. Hobsbawm advanced an argument that ran counter to received interpretations of the empire as a moribund failure; a revision that has found recent support in the work of Pieter M. Judson, which stresses the dynamic and creative relationship between the imperial state and local communities within the empire.⁵⁴ Hobsbawm argued that Habsburg subjects enjoyed the benefit of living 'simultaneously in different social universes and different historical epochs. Moravia at the end of the nineteenth century was the background to Gregor Mendel's genetics, Sigmund Freud's *Interpretation of dreams* and Leoš Janáček's *Jenufa*.' The long decline of the Habsburg empire, intensifying at the *fin de siècle*, stimulated profound literary and historical reflections: 'Austrian minds had time to reflect on the death and disintegration of their empire.' Hobsbawm wove himself into these reflections, as he commenced this passage of *Interesting times* by observing that 'I have belonged to untypical minorities, starting with the enormous advantage of a background in the old Habsburg Empire.' Concluding, Hobsbawm cast himself as an outsider, 'whether as an Englishman among the central Europeans, a continental immigrant in Britain, a Jew everywhere'; 'a good way to stand' for an historian, borne from the liminal fracturing of empire.⁵⁵ Perhaps it was consciousness of being the product of a 'central European diaspora', as he explained to university students in Budapest in 1993, at once an outsider who was also an insider – 'in an oblique way' as an historian, Hobsbawm added – that allowed him to identify the ambiguous

⁵³ Eric Hobsbawm, 'Memories of Weimar', *London Review of Books*, 30 (2008), www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v30/n02/eric-hobsbawm/diary, accessed 2 Feb. 2022.

⁵⁴ Pieter M. Judson, *The Habsburg empire: a new history* (Cambridge, MA, 2018), p. 4.

⁵⁵ Hobsbawm, *Interesting times*, pp. 415–16.

legacy of the *fin de siècle*.⁵⁶ The creative spark of the Jewish outsider's perspective was stimulated, Hobsbawm believed, by a curious combination of tolerance and withheld rights that reached its apogee at that contradictory and vibrant *fin de siècle* moment, as he argued when reflecting upon 'the emancipation of Jewish talent': 'the times of maximum stimulus for Jewish talent may have been those when the Jews became conscious of the limits of assimilation – the *fin de siècle* moment of Proust, who came to maturity in the Dreyfus decade, the era of Schoenberg, Mahler, Freud, Schnitzler and Karl Kraus'.⁵⁷

IV

In both *The age of extremes* and *Interesting times*, Hobsbawm acknowledged that 'the past is another country, but it has left its mark on those who once lived there'. It is necessary for the 'autobiographical historian' to map this past.

For without such a map, how can we track the paths of a lifetime through its changing landscapes, or understand why and when we hesitated and stumbled, or how we lived among those with whom our lives were intertwined and on whom they depended? For these things throw light not only on single lives but on the world.⁵⁸

Hobsbawm's map of the *fin de siècle* and the post-First World War aftermath was outlined as narrative, yet it was populated with reference to material objects of his past that resonated with presence. 'As this is written, the writer stirs his tea with a spoon made in Korea, whose decorative motifs visibly derive from art nouveau'.⁵⁹

So Hobsbawm inserted a brief acknowledgement of his presence in *The age of empire*. Indicated in the body of the text by an asterisk that draws the reader to a note at the foot of the page, the assertion of presence constituted barely more than a single line: this acknowledgement of the author, literally in the act of composition, is virtually unique in Hobsbawm's *Ages* histories. It compels the reader to pause on the historian's intervention in the act of composition, 'as this is written', and reflect on the lost past outlined at this point of the narrative, of the once 'all-conquering modern style': how Art Nouveau triumphed through innumerable domestic objects ranging from the luxuries of Tiffany and Lalique to 'the table-lamps and cutlery which mechanical imitation spread through modern suburban homes'. Yet Art Nouveau also provided a lesson in transience, subject to a 'rapid disappearance' in the early twentieth century, overwhelmed by industrialization; a history acknowledged and dismissed in the twirl of a spoon.

⁵⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, 'Outside and inside history', in Eric Hobsbawm, *On nationalism* (London, 2022), p. 3.

⁵⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, 'Enlightenment and achievement: the emancipation of Jewish talent', in Hobsbawm, *Fractured times*, p. 75.

⁵⁸ Hobsbawm, *Interesting times*, p. 7.

⁵⁹ Hobsbawm, *The age of empire*, p. 230.

Following Eelco Runia's conception, Hobsbawm's 'stowaway' spoon provides a gesture of the historian's presence; a metonym for a vanished past of Art Nouveau yet also representing a form of discontinuity, as this cultural reference has been transmitted not from *fin de siècle* Vienna but modern Korea, where culture has been turned into cheap mass production industrial commodity. Runia suggests such a metonymical stowaway reflects Balzac's Colonel Chabert, the presumed dead Napoleonic officer who produces a rupture in time and space by suddenly reappearing in Restoration Paris: 'metonymy is a metaphor for discontinuity, or, rather, for the entwinement of continuity and discontinuity'.⁶⁰

In drawing attention to stirring his tea with a spoon *reminiscent* of Art Nouveau style, Hobsbawm hints at the presence that Runia describes as 'feelings that made you into the person you are', a theme taken up more extensively in other works and in the 'Overture' to *The age of empire*. The Overture begins with a quotation from Pierre Nora's *Lieux de mémoire*: that history is always an 'incomplete and reconstruction' of the past, while memory forms a 'lived bond with the eternal present'.⁶¹ An intense impression of this lived bond is immediately summoned in the Overture's first paragraph, in which the reader is introduced to an account of the Hobsbawm family story outlined earlier in this article. In justifying commencing a narrative of 'world history' with 'an autobiographical anecdote', Hobsbawm outlined his conception of the 'twilight zone' that provides the epigram of this article. It was important to try to get to grips with the twilight zone of the world before 1914, Hobsbawm argued, as it shaded into the present. In the Overture, Hobsbawm observes that the sinking of the *Titanic* in April 1912 'still retains all its power to make headlines'. '[T]hree-quarters of a century later', as Hobsbawm marked the passage of time, the *Titanic* disaster continued to function as a rupture, disrupting a tendency to cling to the notion of steady linear progress. The *Titanic* remained present as a metonym of discontinuity.⁶²

Hobsbawm's 'Overture' reflects a connection between the personal and the wider historical context, and past thought with enduring contemporary influence. From establishing himself in the past that he is narrating, Hobsbawm proceeds to outline 'the movers and shapers of the twentieth century', and whose thought and political activism were formed in the period from the late nineteenth century to the outbreak of the First World War: Lenin, forty-four years old in 1914, Stalin thirty-five, Keynes thirty-two, Hitler twenty-five, Mao twenty-one. Hobsbawm argued that they have shaped the author's and the reader's reality: present in their experience, and the 'twilight zone between history and memory'. It is not only 'the relatively few surviving individuals who have a direct link with the years before 1914 [who] face the problem of how to look at the landscape of their private twilight'; 'everyone who lives in the world of the 1980s...has been shaped by

⁶⁰ Runia, 'Presence', p. 27.

⁶¹ Hobsbawm, *The age of empire*, p. 1.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 3–5.

the era which led up to the First World War'.⁶³ The epigram from Nora alluded to the twilight zone of memory, as Hobsbawm acknowledged 'the dialectics of remembering and forgetting, unaware of its successive deformations...latent for long periods, then suddenly revives'.⁶⁴

Hobsbawm's re-enactment of the past is evident in *Interesting times*, recalling the child who came to know *fin de siècle* Vienna through parents clinging to its vanished culture and way of life. The recent Viennese past infiltrated into Hobsbawm's present through inherited memory. 'What children born in 1917 knew of the events of the still young twentieth century which were so alive in the minds of parents and grandparents – war, breakdown, revolution, inflation – was what adults told us, or, more likely, what we overheard them talking about.'⁶⁵ Hobsbawm's inheritance included Karl Kraus's *The last days of humanity*. In an essay on *The last days*, published in his 2013 collection *Fractured times*, Hobsbawm described how Kraus had emerged from the 1890s as a 'literary-political polemicist' and publisher from 1899 of his own periodical *Die fackel* (the torch), which cast a caustic eye over *fin de siècle* Vienna. Hobsbawm argued that Kraus applied a forensic exposure to the Viennese press, 'which expressed the corruption of the time, but was itself a great corrupter', and the glittering hypocrisies of the bourgeois culture of 'fashionable Vienna'. It was through the assassination of the Habsburg Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914 that Kraus's 'local chronicle became recognizable as a commentary on the end of a whole world'. Originally conceived as a drama written between 1915 and 1917, *The last days of humanity* (*Die letzten tage der menschheit*) was published in book form in 1922. Hobsbawm described Kraus's sprawling (nearly 800 page) narrative of Austria's immersion in a calamitous war 'as a paradigm of the total development of the bourgeois-liberal, technological-capitalist society'. For Kraus, 'the war became for him the last days not only of Austria, but of mankind. For after this collapse there could be no going back. There was only a forward step into an unimaginably apocalyptic future.'⁶⁶ Hobsbawm had found in Kraus his guide into 'the age of catastrophe', and how that past ruptures into the present, as Hobsbawm observed of another Balkan conflict as the 'short' twentieth century drew to a close: 'Sarajevo – still an ominous name today.'⁶⁷

It was in the 1920s that Hobsbawm began to form a historical consciousness of his inheritance through his mother's gift of *The last days of humanity*. Kraus found 'words for the first great act of tragedy of the twentieth century, the world war of 1914'.⁶⁸ Hobsbawm's copy was a first edition, 'which I continually re-read [and] bears on its title page the name of my mother'. Kraus's work 'accompanied my childhood. Too young to have experienced the First World

⁶³ Ibid., pp. 3–4.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 1.

⁶⁵ Hobsbawm, *Interesting times*, p. 9.

⁶⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, 'The last days of mankind', in Hobsbawm, *Fractured times*, 140. For the composition and publication history of *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit*, see Edward Timms, *Karl Kraus, apocalyptic satirist* (New Haven, CT, 1986), pp. 371–3.

⁶⁷ Hobsbawm, 'The last days of mankind', p. 134.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 142.

War and the death of the monarchy, I came to know both through this book.' All his life, Hobsbawm preserved his mother's copy of Kraus's 'masterpiece': 'For Viennese of my generation...*The last days* is simply part of our lives.'⁶⁹ As part of his life, and growing up in Vienna, Hobsbawm acquired, as he observed in his autobiography, the 'necessary skill' of 'self-awareness, that is to say standing both in one's body and outside it'.⁷⁰ The past was present in him, through his own and his parents' experience, although also 'out of place', as Eelco Runia observed of the eponymous hero of Walter Scott's 1814 novel *Waverley*. 'Edward Waverley is a metonymical fistula between Scotland and England, past and present, and that in and by his journey he not only juxtaposes but eventually also connects the planes.'⁷¹ Hobsbawm places himself as present in a moment of memory that 'connects the planes', amongst the adults with whom he grew up in 1920s Vienna who recall the *fin de siècle* past, a presence to which they cannot return, except in rueful memory.

Hobsbawm's *Fractured times* highlighted a theme of rupture. In the Preface, Hobsbawm described the book as 'about what happened to the art and culture of bourgeois society after that society had vanished with the generation after 1914, never to return'. By the end of the nineteenth century, European capitalism dominated the globe by 'conquest, technical superiority and the globalisation of its economy, it also carried with it a powerful cargo of beliefs and values, which it naturally assumed superior to others...I was born and brought up in this "bourgeois civilisation".'⁷² The photograph reproduced in *Interesting times* of 'five small children posed eighty years ago' dramatized the impression of a vanished civilization. This image was not collected together with the other photographs in the middle of the book. Confronting the reader on the first page of the autobiography, it is the only photograph so unusually placed in the text. The photograph entered Hobsbawm's life belatedly, and unexpectedly, forwarded to him in 1994 in a letter posted from Hamburg, by a woman named Melitta who as a young child had been amongst those assembled on the terrace.⁷³ Discussing the 'metonymical illustrations' in Sebald's novels, Eelco Runia argues that Sebald dramatized their role in summoning the presence of the past by their odd or unsettling placement in the text, to 'maximize their out-of-place-ness'.⁷⁴ Hobsbawm wanted the reader to share this experience of rupture by including the photo and his commentary in a way that disturbed and triggered memory.

In *Interesting times* Hobsbawm locates himself in the disruptive visual metaphor of the children's photograph, at once at home in his own story but also out of place; it is reproduced as a sign of the disruptions to come, the forces at work in his own family life and those of the wider history which have dislodged his parents and their contemporaries and left them – in the case of

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 136.

⁷⁰ Hobsbawm, *Interesting times*, p. xiii.

⁷¹ Runia, *Moved by the past*, p. 70.

⁷² Hobsbawm, *Fractured times*, pp. ix, x.

⁷³ Hobsbawm, *Interesting times*, p. 1.

⁷⁴ Runia, *Moved by the past*, p. 67.

Hobsbawm's parents – literally destitute in post-war Vienna: 'from the mid-twenties the family seems to have constantly lived from hand to mouth, barely knowing where the money for the daily expenses would come from'.⁷⁵ The reader follows the opening created by the photograph and Hobsbawm's memory down the steep footpath from the terrace, to a tree where he recalled playing with another child who had been sent away from Recklinghausen in Germany. 'This must have been my first contact with the major events of twentieth-century history, namely the French occupation of the Ruhr in 1923, via one of the children temporarily sent out of harm's way to well-wishers in Austria.'⁷⁶

V

In the preface of *Fractured times*, his 2012 collection of essays, ostensibly on the theme 'culture and society in the twentieth century', Hobsbawm made it clear that his essential preoccupation was with 'what happened to the art and culture of bourgeois society after that society had vanished with the generation after 1914, never to return'.⁷⁷ In his cultural history essays, Hobsbawm stressed the radical and working-class activist dimension of cultural developments in Vienna and elsewhere in Europe at the *fin de siècle*.

Hobsbawm linked his narrative of European cultural history to his own history, and the 'crucial' period before the First World War. 'My examples are mainly taken from the region that forms my own cultural background – geographically Central Europe, linguistically German – but they also pay attention to the crucial "Indian summer" or "Belle Époque" of that culture in the last decades before 1914.'⁷⁸ 'Mitteleuropean destinies' was intensified for Hobsbawm by an awareness that 'the people of this culture must be called "middle Europeans" because the twentieth century made them homeless'.⁷⁹ Hobsbawm argued that the collapse of the Habsburg empire and later the Holocaust were key factors in the disappearance of 'the old culture of Mitteleuropa', whose centre was Vienna. Many of the cultural and intellectual leaders of Mitteleuropa were Jewish, who, Hobsbawm argued, 'wished passionately to be German, though...they wanted to assimilate not to the German nation but to the German middle class'.⁸⁰ In *fin de siècle* Vienna, this assimilation seemed for a time possible. Hobsbawm surveyed the entwined history of culture, class, and gender in this period in two essays published in *Fractured times*, 'Art Nouveau' and 'Culture and gender in European bourgeois society 1870–1914', and also in the essay 'The influence of Marxism 1880–1914', published in Hobsbawm's 2011 collection, *How to change the world*. In these essays, Hobsbawm returned to the theme of the dynamic development of culture that

⁷⁵ Hobsbawm, *Interesting times*, p. 27.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.

⁷⁷ Hobsbawm, *Fractured times*, p. ix.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. ix, x.

⁷⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, 'Mitteleuropean destinies', in Hobsbawm, *Fractured times*, p. 91.

⁸⁰ Hobsbawm, 'The Jews of Germany', in *ibid.*, p. 81.

he had described in *The age of empire*, and which shaped the modern world of the twentieth century – and had helped to shape his own history. Hobsbawm's presence was noted in his 'Art Nouveau' essay; he repeated the Art Nouveau teaspoon story that he had included in *The age of empire*.⁸¹ Hobsbawm's presence was also implied in his selection as a learned commentator on this topic. The 'Art Nouveau' essay was originally presented as a lecture conducted at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 2000, part of the conference *Art Nouveau: nature, history, symbol* that 'coincided with the showing of the Art Nouveau exhibition and provided a major reappraisal of the scholarship in this field'.⁸² The lecture was part of an extensive programme of events, exhibition, and a definitive volume produced as part of the V&A's centenary focus on Art Nouveau.⁸³

In these articles and talks, Hobsbawm sought to establish what he described as an 'existential connection' between social democrats and the cultural avant-garde, 'both outsiders opposed to and by bourgeois orthodoxy...heterodoxies overlapped'. The lifelong socialist saw his own history in this heterodoxy. Hobsbawm's *How to change the world* essay focused on 'The influence of Marxism' on 'general culture' in the period of the Second International. While Austrian social democracy 'became a nursery of Marxist intellectuals' including Victor Adler and Karl Kautsky, Hobsbawm noted that the majority of Austrian intellectuals were not drawn to socialism, rather to 'an intensive life of culture and personal relations, a largely non-political evasion or introspective analysis of the crisis of their civilisation'. Ostensibly discussing Marxism, Hobsbawm cited an extensive roll-call of the creative cultural talent that enriched *fin de siècle* Vienna, from Freud to Schnitzler and Schoenberg. Readers were also treated to a discussion of the 'direct link with socialism' and 'the applied and decorative arts' forged in Britain by William Morris and Walter Crane, and in Belgium by Henry Vandervelde and the Symbolists attracted to the Parti Ouvrier Belge.⁸⁴ These intellectual and cultural innovators reflected the transformation Hobsbawm identified with the *Jugendstil* or Art Nouveau movements of the period, a forward looking movement of 'modern life' that provided 'the environment that generated Art Nouveau'.

In his lecture for the V&A exhibition, Hobsbawm argued that Art Nouveau was a movement that was 'urban and metropolitan', in service to the emerging middle class, and reflected in the development of transit systems, apartment buildings, public baths, concert halls, and department stores.⁸⁵ In Britain, Hobsbawm identified a particularly creative development of overlapping heterodoxies between social democrats and the cultural avant-garde. 'The novelty of the *fin de siècle* city' was also reflected in public libraries and public swimming baths that were built in the period: 'the inspiration was both social and

⁸¹ Hobsbawm, 'Art Nouveau', in *ibid.*, p. 126.

⁸² Learning and visitor services division annual report 2000/1, Victorian and Albert Museum (London, 2001), pp. 10–11.

⁸³ Greenhalgh, ed., *Art Nouveau 1890–1914*.

⁸⁴ Eric Hobsbawm, 'The influence of Marxism 1880–1914', in Hobsbawm, *How to change the world*, pp. 230, 249–51.

⁸⁵ Hobsbawm, 'Art Nouveau', pp. 116–18.

aesthetic...the British progressive-socialist milieu. Aesthetics and social idealism went together.⁸⁶ Amongst these creative outsiders, Hobsbawm included not only Morris and Crane, but also Eleanor Marx, George Bernard Shaw, Edward Carpenter, Havelock Ellis, and Oscar Wilde.⁸⁷ Hobsbawm noted a contradiction 'at the heart of art nouveau and the *fin de siècle* family of avant-gardes'; it was designed for the middle classes but was 'anti-bourgeois and even anti-capitalist in its origins'. Hobsbawm acknowledged that many of its practitioners – the Belgian architect Victor Horta, the Arts and Crafts designer Morris – sought wealthy and middle-class clients. Yet in Britain the first industrial capitalist nation also produced, in the writings of John Ruskin and Morris, a powerful 'denunciation of [capitalism's] social and cultural consequences'.⁸⁸ As Paul Greenhalgh observes, 'The immense stature Morris enjoyed in the *fin de siècle* world was much to do with the way he combined his artistic skills with a powerful political commitment.'⁸⁹ Yet the tension between Morris's commercial practice and political idealism reflected a contradiction that helped explain the short life span of the Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau movements. It was not fit for purpose in twentieth-century modernity – mass consumption had to reject anti-industrialism, 'since it had to be suitable for mass production and made compatible with the machine'. It had to be made suitable for the industrialization that produced Hobsbawm's faux Art Nouveau teaspoon. And there was, in Hobsbawm's account of Art Nouveau's short life, a touch of autobiography in his comment on the loss of the style's middle-class market. 'In most of Europe the self-confident, moneyed, city-building, servant keeping families did not survive the First World War.'⁹⁰

In *Interesting times*, Hobsbawm presents his mother Nelly as a woman who reflected the cultural and gender role changes of the period, and as a subject who represented the presence of loss. Nelly Grün had been born into relative middle-class Viennese privilege, a milieu that reflected the opportunities that he described in the essay 'Culture and gender in European bourgeois society 1870–1914'. Hobsbawm observed how the spread of culture and consumption enabled a greater participation by women in society. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the bourgeois woman became 'a bearer of culture', drawn from factors that reflected 'a change in the structure of the bourgeoisie itself that made culture a more central defining characteristic of this class and emphasized the role of women in it'. *Jugendstil* or Art Nouveau emerged as 'the avant-garde style based on arts applied to domestic living'.⁹¹ The material conditions that sustained this way of life dissipated with the war, and Nelly would never again know its prosperity, 'although in some ways she remained conventional in the pre-1914 Viennese middle-class sense'. Nelly found an avenue for

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 119–20.

⁸⁷ Hobsbawm, 'The influence of Marxism 1880–1914', p. 246.

⁸⁸ Hobsbawm, 'Art Nouveau', pp. 121–3.

⁸⁹ Paul Greenhalgh, 'Le style Anglais, English roots of the new art', in Greenhalgh, ed., *Art Nouveau 1890–1914*, p. 132.

⁹⁰ Hobsbawm, 'Art Nouveau', pp. 127–9.

⁹¹ Eric Hobsbawm, 'Culture and gender in European bourgeois society 1870–1914', in Hobsbawm, *Fractured times*, pp. 107–10.

self-expression in writing magazine stories and even a novel, although constantly hampered by the need to make ends meet, particularly after the death of her husband. In *Interesting times* Hobsbawm included an indented quotation from a letter Nelly sent to her sister in 1928, lamenting that she could neither afford to keep a maid, nor conceive of life without one: 'a maid is just as much a necessity as food or a roof over your head'. The highlighted inclusion of Nelly's surviving letter is a representation of loss, of her own diminished circumstances and her absence from her son's life; within a few years failing health due to tuberculosis provided the first fundamental disruption of his life and that of his sister. 'Her illness transformed our situation.'⁹²

VI

In the opening scenes of the 1996 BBC Four television documentary, *Eric Hobsbawm: the stories my country told me*, Hobsbawm was filmed in a Viennese antique shop, purchasing an old Baedeker of Austria published in 1929, the year of his father's death. The film cuts to Hobsbawm standing before the apartment building at 45 Weissgerberstrasse, where Leopold died, as a consequence of a heart attack, on the steps in the midst of a 'hard alpine winter'. Pointing to the upstairs windows, where Nelly could hear Leopold calling to her through 'the freezing air', Hobsbawm comments: 'much the same as before'.⁹³

The stories my country told me immerses the viewer in the presence of an unresolved past and provided Hobsbawm an opportunity to participate in a performance of his own personal history, enacted at another moment of cathartic change. The viewer follows Hobsbawm on a journey literally disrupted by history, by train on the old remnant of the Pressburger Bahn from Vienna towards Bratislava, a journey once made possible in the pre-First World War period between the Austrian capital and the then Habsburg city of Pressburg (or in Hungarian, Pozsony), but long broken by another calamitous war and subsequent Cold War division, that left the rail line dismembered at the border between East and West, strung with barbed wire and overseen by watchtowers. In both Hobsbawm's narration, and the unfolding images of past and present, the audience is confronted by the bewildering kaleidoscope of revolution and regime change displacing borders, place names, and lives, that as the film revealed continued in the wake of another episode of tumultuous post-Cold War change: in 1993, Slovakia broke with the Czech Republic in the name of Slovak nationalism.⁹⁴ In *The stories my country told me*, Hobsbawm was drawn into the presence of the history that shaped the turbulence that undermined his family in post-war Vienna, and the viewer is drawn in, not only by the account and newsreel projection of the past, but by the repeated juxtaposition of that past with the disruptions of the present.

⁹² Hobsbawm, *Interesting times*, pp. 17–18, 33.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁹⁴ Tony Judt, *Postwar: a history of Europe since 1945* (London, 2010), pp. 662–3.

Hobsbawm was filmed contemplating an atlas that he had preserved from his Viennese school years. Hobsbawm swept his hand over the page where at age thirteen he had written 'down with Hitler' above a rough pattern of hand-drawn Stars of David. 'I didn't regard myself as being particularly politically developed at that stage, but there you are. Clearly something was happening.'⁹⁵ In *The stories my country told me*, the viewer observes the aged historian contemplating the crude pencil renderings of the younger self in the atlas page, the tentative working up of identity in the face of history already disrupting his life, and given poignant form in the purchase of the expensive atlas, contributing to family hardship, as Hobsbawm recorded in *Interesting times*: 'The book was bought, but the sense that on this occasion, at least, a major sacrifice had been made has remained with me.'⁹⁶

At the end of the railway line, on the Austrian side, Hobsbawm directed the viewer to the presence of a local war memorial, 'to remind you what finished this line off'. The camera pans the panels added to a memorial originally erected to honour the dead of the 'Great War'; the roll-call of Second World War dead, twice as many, Hobsbawm observed, as those who fell in the First, and a toll that reflected 'the great catastrophic war' and the 'trauma' felt in countless small villages throughout central Europe; a history that continued to resonate. 'If you want to understand anything that has happened in Europe and what is happening today', it was necessary to reflect on the meanings inscribed in stone and metal plate on the face of the memorial; material remains of loss that required interpretation.

Hobsbawm argued that nationalism reshaped the pre-First World War European world, in movements 'multiplying in regions where they had been previously unknown', and not least in the Habsburg empire.⁹⁷ Reductionist nationalism simplified the multi-cultural identities of pre-1914 imperial realms, including the central Europe of Hobsbawm's family background, as he observed in *The age of empire*. 'Central Europe became full of German nationalists with obviously Slav names, and Magyars whose names were literal translations of German or adaptations of Slovak ones.'⁹⁸ Nationalism remained a force reshaping the post-Cold War world. In 1996, Hobsbawm re-immersed himself in this story, undertaking his truncated journey for *The stories my country told me* in the wake of the severing of Czechoslovakia into two separate nations, a division symbolized as Hobsbawm concluded his journey to Bratislava by crossing the Danube river by foot, trekking into the Slovak capital over the disused tracks of the rail bridge, 'a piece of industrial archaeology', another totem of loss, 'superfluous', as Hobsbawm's voiceover observes, to the future imagined by the new state, and engendering a 'curious sensation', as Hobsbawm commented of his own feelings. The viewer watches

⁹⁵ Eric Hobsbawm: *The stories my country told me*, Arena Programme BBC 1996, www.youtube.com/watch?v=OyO2hbvxx8s&ab_channel=FumiyaWANI, accessed 2 Feb. 2022.

⁹⁶ Hobsbawm, *Interesting times*, p. 15.

⁹⁷ Hobsbawm, *Nations and nationalism since 1780*, pp. 105–6.

⁹⁸ Hobsbawm, *The age of empire*, p. 151.

Hobsbawm's diminishing figure exiting the skeletal tunnel of rusting steel framework.

In conversation with the Slovak historian Miklas Gazo in a once famous Bratislava café reborn as casino, Hobsbawm recounts the shifting regimes by noting the changing statues outside in the Old Town square: from the Habsburg Empress Maria Theresa, destroyed by Czech nationalists in 1921, to a Slovak folk hero beneath a tall plinth symbolizing the interwar Czechoslovak state, torn down at Hitler's command in 1939. In 1972, a communist era tribute to Ľudovít Štúr, the nineteenth-century Slovakian nationalist who championed the codification of the Slovak language, was erected and still stands, its symbolic purpose renewed in the 1990s, as Hobsbawm noted in *Nations and nationalism*, in the name of 'ethnic-linguistic and cultural homogeneity'. It was decreed that Slovak would be the only official language which the minority Hungarian population would be compelled to adopt in dealings with the government.⁹⁹ In *The stories my country told me* Hobsbawm is filmed walking beside the statue, and acknowledging the historian's role: 'I produce, or people like me produce, the raw material for them.' The material representation of national and ideological identity is not always history, as Hobsbawm observed, but may be designed to construct a mythology of nationalism, a culture not of analysis, but feeling: material presence rendered from narrative of 'mutually incompatible fairy tales, they change, they swap around', as Hobsbawm narrated. And who is this 'I' who produces the translation from story to statue? In Bratislava and on the disrupted Pressburger Bahn Hobsbawm was faced with the elusive presence of past and identity. Asked by documentary director Frederick Baker why a nation is so difficult to define, Hobsbawm replied: 'because nobody has a single identity. You always have these multiple identities between who you choose and depending on the situation, and you may decide to be a Viennese or an Austrian or British.' Seated side by side in the carriage, Hobsbawm and Baker displayed their passports, totems for both men of a transition across Europe of family and identity. Hobsbawm's journey highlighted the disconnections generated by this transition: registering the poignant losses of the past, looking up at the windows of the Viennese flat in which he and his family had once lived, and unsuccessfully searching for his parent's grave in Vienna's Central Cemetery. As he stood in the overgrown cemetery, Hobsbawm was asked by Baker if he wished to be buried there. 'No', Hobsbawm replied. 'I'm an ex-Viennese.'

Even as Hobsbawm travelled in 1996, the rail link was being restored in the name of the eagerly sought accelerations of post-Cold War globalization. The past was not quite replicated: the film sweeps over the construction site of the new rail line between Bratislava and Vienna's international airport, a deviation to the future, as the new Slovakia sought connections to the benefits of global capitalism. It was a future that seemed to leave Hobsbawm stranded in a post-ideological world that 'lacked any international system or structure', as he glumly observed in *The age of extremes*.¹⁰⁰ In the conclusion of *The stories my*

⁹⁹ Hobsbawm, *Nations and nationalism since 1780*, pp. 185–6.

¹⁰⁰ Hobsbawm, *The age of extremes*, p. 559.

country told me, Hobsbawm was left standing in the cool and efficient anonymity of the modern Vienna airport. 'If you want a symbol of the end of the millennium here it is, a large enclosed space; you don't know, looking around it, where you are...not in what country, not in what continent.' The signage was rendered in the English language, which he described as the 'international pidgin of the late twentieth century'. Hobsbawm observes the multi-cultural travellers, who at least seem to 'know who they are', amid the transnational retail franchises – a Harrods store, a faux English pub. These symbols and objects ostensibly signpost the present, and point to the future, yet a disturbance is generated by a sense of loss, the memory of an absent past, overridden by change, and represented by the bemused presence of Hobsbawm, suspended in the space of the terminal concourse: an embodiment of the narrative that Hobsbawm outlined in *The age of extremes*. 'As the citizens of the *fin de siècle* tapped their way through the global fog that surrounded them, into the third millennium, all they knew for certain was that an era of history had ended. They knew very little else.'¹⁰¹

VII

The era that ended appeared not only to be the short twentieth century that Hobsbawm took as his subject in *The age of extremes*; it seemed a termination of the hopes that he had once invested in the alternative forms of identity, political action, and culture of an earlier *fin de siècle* that he reflected upon in his narratives. Roy Foster's obituary identified Eric Hobsbawm as an historian whose later work reflected a pronounced cultural turn.¹⁰² It was also a turn towards the personal history of the times that he felt had shaped him and his politically engaged mission as an historian.

Discussing the history of memory, Stefan Berger refers to 'agonistic memory frames' that 'seek to produce passions for greater social justice and global solidarity': an emphatic mode of remembering to counter the 'us versus them' mentality that often characterizes antagonistic nationalist memory frames.¹⁰³ Hobsbawm's narration of *The stories my country told me* served the aims of an agonistic memory framing, as he used his own experience to warn against the divisive consequences of nationalism, and attempted to reconcile with the historian's role in fermenting nationalist fervour. Hobsbawm's keepsakes – photos, atlas, Kraus's *Last days of humanity* – operated as compelling personal memory objects in Hobsbawm's response to the twilight realm of *fin de siècle* Vienna. How Hobsbawm felt about the past was evident in the family photo in Vienna and the recollection it stirred of a lost world that shaded into his life and work. Both material object and narrative helped shape the presence of history that Hobsbawm identified and transmitted to readers and documentary audiences. In exploring the unresolved history of the twilight zone, narration remained the significant form for exploring the meaning and sensations stimulated by the

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 558–9.

¹⁰² Foster, 'Eric Hobsbawm', p. 7.

¹⁰³ Berger, *History and identity*, p. 176.

material remnants of the past; yet the image of Hobsbawm handling the atlas, or searching amongst the disordered headstones in the Central Cemetery, provokes its own visceral impact.

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