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Hobsbawm on International Relations

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DAVID DÍAZ-ARIAS, MAR 12 2013

British Marxist historian Eric J. Hobsbawm passed away on October 1st, 2012. Since the 1970s, Professor Hobsbawm became a pivotal scholar who influenced several generations of historians around the world. Among other contributions, historians will continue discussing and using his perspective on social history and his terms “social bandolerism,” “protonationalism,” and “invented tradition.” But did Hobsbawm make any contribution to the study of international relations? The answer to that question deserves a longer essay, but I would like to offer some preliminary thoughts. Although Hobsbawm did not specifically contribute to international relations, I argue that his perspective on the role of international relations may be traced throughout his syntheses on world history and some political essays he wrote.

Most of Hobsbawm's works highlight imperialism as a fundamental framework to understand the world in historical perspective. Hobsbawm provided key insights on the role of imperialism to better understand the history of the late 19th century and early 20th century. Consequently, he gives information on how imperialism produced and delineated specific international relations. For him, imperialism had defined the way Europe understood international relations with non-European countries by the end of the 19th century. These relations, of course, depended on an economic division of the world that shaped two areas: a metropolitan area and the nations on the periphery. Relations among those countries were based on new forms of colonialism. Hobsbawm wrote in his *The Age of Capital* (1987): “In short, the new colonialism was a by-product of an era of economic-political rivalry between competing national economies, intensified by protectionism.” In this perspective, imperialism and new colonialism created the foundations of a world composed of a dominant world and a dependent world.

Later on, Hobsbawm advanced on the interpretation of the Cold War and the US and USSR relations during that period as a consequence of this confrontation between two “camps.” In his *The Age of Extremes* (1996), Hobsbawm understood the construction of the policy of confrontation between the two superpowers as follows: “The USSR, conscious of the precariousness and insecurity of its position, faced the world power of the USA, conscious of the precariousness and insecurity of central and western Europe, and the uncertain future of much of Asia.” From this point of view, the contention policy was based on old visions on the USSR:

George Kennan, the American diplomat who in early 1946 formulated the ‘containment’ policy which Washington adopted with enthusiasm, did not believe that Russia was crusading for communism, and—as his subsequent career proved—was far from an ideological crusader (except possibly against democratic politics, of which he had a low opinion). He was merely an able Russian expert of the old school of diplomatic power-politics—there were many such in European foreign offices—who saw Russia, Tsarist or Bolshevik, as a backward and barbarous society ruled by men moved by a ‘traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity,’ always cutting itself off from the outside world, always under autocrats, always seeking ‘security’ only in patient and deadly struggle for total destruction of rival power, never in compact and compromises with it; always, consequently, responding only to ‘the logic of force,’ never to reason. Communism, of course, in his opinion made the old Russia more dangerous by reinforcing the most brutal of great powers with the most ruthless of utopian, i.e. world-conquering, ideologies. But the implication of the thesis was that the only ‘rival power’ to Russia's, namely the USA, would have had to ‘contain’ its pressure by uncompromising resistance even if it had not been communist. Conversely, from Moscow's point of view, the only rational strategy for defending and exploiting a vast but fragile new position of international power was exactly the same: no compromise.

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Besides imperialism, as his analysis of the 20th century continues, Hobsbawm gave evidence to analyze the role of war in configuring international relations in the past and the present. Hobsbawm still considered war to be a determining actor of the relations between nations since it finally defined powers and influences. By the end of his life he struggled to understand the world after the Cold War and the way politicians used concepts like terrorism and democracy to reorganize new scenarios of international relations. In an essay published in 2004 in *Foreign Policy* (No. 144), he argued:

We are at present engaged in what purports to be a planned reordering of the world by the powerful states. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are but one part of a supposedly universal effort to create world order by 'spreading democracy.' This idea is not merely quixotic—it is dangerous. The rhetoric surrounding this crusade implies that the system is applicable in a standardized (Western) form, that it can succeed everywhere, that it can remedy today's transnational dilemmas, and that it can bring peace, rather than sow disorder. It cannot.

Hobsbawm offered some ways to understand both the wish of spreading democracy and its limits. He saw globalization as a framework that motivated some people to believe that democracy may be as globalized as iPods, just another commodity to spread. Moreover, the "relapse into bloodshed and anarchy that has occurred so visibly in much of the world has also made the idea of spreading a new order more attractive." Finally, imperialism still appears in Hobsbawm's vision of the configuration of an international order: "The United States has been ready with the necessary combination of megalomania and messianism, derived from its revolutionary origins," and it meant that it desires "to remake the world in the image" it sees of itself. Yet, he did not believe this process could feasibly occur:

While threatening the integrity of universal values, the campaign to spread democracy will not succeed. The 20th century demonstrated that states could not simply remake the world or abbreviate historical transformations. Nor can they easily effect social change by transferring institutions across borders. Even within the ranks of territorial nation-states, the conditions for effective democratic government are rare: an existing state enjoying legitimacy, consent, and the ability to mediate conflicts between domestic groups. Without such consensus, there is no single sovereign people and therefore no legitimacy for arithmetical majorities. When this consensus—be it religious, ethnic, or both—is absent, democracy has been suspended (as is the case with democratic institutions in Northern Ireland), the state has split (as in Czechoslovakia), or society has descended into permanent civil war (as in Sri Lanka). "Spreading democracy" aggravated ethnic conflict and produced the disintegration of states in multinational and multicomunal regions after both 1918 and 1989, a bleak prospect.

Hobsbawm made a strong contribution by analyzing nationalism in historical perspective probing how it was part of a world-wide political program to invent nations. Something important to emphasize is that he also analyzed globalization and its impact on the Nation-State and international relations. In *The Age of Extremes* (but also in his *Nations and Nationalisms since 1789*), Hobsbawm proclaimed the nation-state to be weakening in the new global order:

The nation-state was eroded in two ways, from above and below. It was rapidly losing power and function to various supra-national entities, and, indeed, absolutely, inasmuch as the disintegration of large states and empires produced a multiplicity of smaller ones, too weak to defend themselves in an era of international anarchy. It was also... losing its monopoly of effective power and its historic privileges within its borders, as witness the rise of private security or protection and the rise of private courier services to compete with the post, hitherto virtually everywhere managed by a state ministry.

By analyzing the world in a historical perspective, Hobsbawm found continuities in international relations. Although it is true he did not go into deeper theoretical explanations of IR, I think he gave some evidence on how those relations were historically shaped. In *On Empire* (2009), Hobsbawm clarified that a historian is not a prophet and consequently is not "professionally obliged to give" an answer on the future of the world. Yet, his life's works do reveal the way the future may be modeled in the following decades. This is, I think, his most important contribution to international relations: a historical perspective to understand the present and its possible futures.

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