

Social History Today

Through the analysis of Hobsbawm's Historical Writing

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BİBLİYOTAK VE ARŞİVLER MERKEZİ

by

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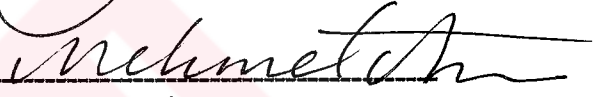
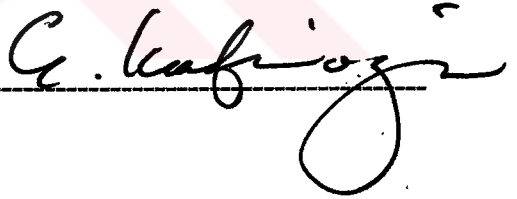
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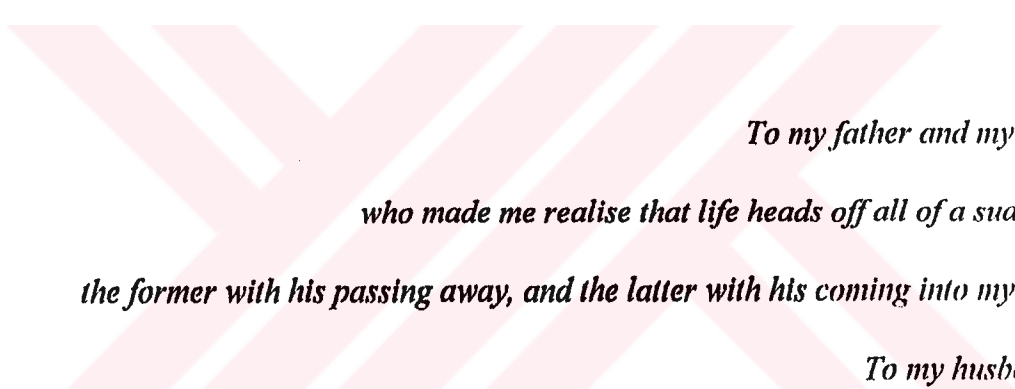
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*To my father and my son,
who made me realise that life heads off all of a sudden,
the former with his passing away, and the latter with his coming into my life.*

*To my husband,
who never gave up realising something permanent and valuable in our lives
against the volatility and unevenness of this world ,
'holding me gently'.*

ABSTRACT

Social History Today

Through The Analysis of Hobsbawm's Historical Writing

by

Çiğdem Coşkun

This thesis aims at concentrating on the main discussions in historiography in the last quarter of the twentieth century with regard to the *changing* questions and problems—such as what the position of historian when s/he writes is, whether it is possible to speak of historical reality or not—through the analysis of the way in which an individual historian views and tries to solve them. There are two overlapping dimensions of the thesis in this sense: On the one hand, the thesis examines the place and evolution of social history within historiography, and its position, especially after the 1980s, against the historical trends —let us say, postmodernist— seeming to threaten not only social history in particular but history as a ‘legitimate cognitive enterprise’ in general. On the other hand, it takes into consideration how E. J. Hobsbawm writes history as a *social historian* (with an emphasis on the works exemplifying his main slant of interests and his way of writing history) and how he views it (with an emphasis on his considerations on historical writing and the different historical trends within it). In relation with the analysis of his works, subsequently, it discusses the position of social history —and history in general— within the framework of the arguments over the validity of the challenges towards it.

ÖZET

Hobsbawm'ın tarihçiliğinin analizi ışığında

sosyal tarihçiliğin bugünü

Çiğdem Coşkun

Bu tez, değişen sorular ve problemler –tarihçinin yazarken aldığı konum, bir tarihsel gerçeklikten söz edilip edilemeyeceği gibi- ile bağlantılı biçimde, onları bir tek tarihçinin nasıl ele aldığından ve çözümlemeye çalıştığından yola çıkarak yirminci yüzyılın son çeyreğinde tarih yazımındaki ana tartışmalara eğilmeyi amaçlıyor. Bu anlamda tezin kesişen geçen iki boyutu olduğundan söz edilebilir: Tez bir taraftan sosyal tarihçiliğin tarih yazımı içindeki yeri ve evrimini ve özellikle 1980'lerden sonra sadece sosyal tarihçiliği değil, bir meşru zihinsel girişim olarak tarihi de tehdit eder konumda olan tarihsel eğilimler –postmodernist- karşısındaki durumunu sorguluyor. Diğer taraftan E. J. Hobsbawm'ın bir sosyal tarihçi olarak nasıl tarih yazdığı (temel ilgi alanlarını ve tarih yazımı tarzını örneklendiren çalışmalarıyla) ve tarihi nasıl algıladığı (tarih yazımı ve farklı tarih yazımı eğilimleri üzerine düşünceleriyle) ele alıyor. Sonuç olarak Hobsbawm'ın eserlerinin analizi ile bağlantılı olarak sosyal tarihçiliğin ve genelde tarihin konumunu, ona yönelen tehditlerin geçerliliği konusundaki tartışmalar çerçevesinde tartışıyor.

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INTRODUCTION

*"We tell stories with each other and against each other in order to speak to each other."*¹ W. Cronon.

*"...narrative has not merely as an epistemological but also as an ontological significance. That is, it is not only a 'cognitive instrument' as Mink claimed... It is constitutive of our very being, it is our way of existing, of constituting ourselves."*²
D. Carr.

In *Nausea* we are invited to the diary of Antoine Roquentin, who makes a historical investigation on Marquis de Rollebon, throughout which Sartre presents us Roquentin's *changing* perception of his job, his experiences, life, and himself. This change is related to the awareness of 'existence', which is within us but we can never touch, and of the 'nausea' this self-awareness creates. While he is thinking about his job he has identified with his whole life for a long time, he begins to question the reason behind his writing history and comes to the conclusion that human beings cannot avoid telling stories, and living together with their stories and those of others.

Why do we need to tell stories? Is it because we want to transform our experiences into 'adventures' and thus to overcome the nausea? Through such questions he becomes suspicious of the nature of his job, since he also becomes aware of the dubious nature of the hypotheses he reaches about Rollebon, apparently reliable ones

¹ W. Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History and Narrative", *The Journal of American History*, March 1992, pp.1373f.

² D. Carr, "Getting the Story Straight: Narrative and Historical Knowledge", *Historiography Between Modernism and Postmodernism*, edited by Jerzy Topolski, 1994, pp. 121-2.

that are constructed based on facts but, indeed, coming from himself and his means in order to unite his information.

As far as historical writing is concerned, the first one of the main questions which the book proposes is whether such an investigation - even though it seems to depend on 'facts'- can avoid being a sole *product* of the imagination of the writer -let us say story teller-, or not. The second one, in that sense, is of how much the 'reconstruction' of past reflects 'historical reality'. In terms of capturing - historical- reality, there is a clash between two opposite trends in historical writing, "...a clash between some versions of realism (historical experience itself is emplotted) and constructivism (narrative plots are imposed on essentially plotless experience)".³

This clash cannot be considered to be *new* no doubt, nor can the fluctuation between one pole to another, even though the questions asked and the answers given differentiate and develop in time. The tension between the two can be taken as a part of a broader discussion in the history of thought between different visions of the world and the self which can be traced more than two thousand years back to the debate between Socrates and the Sophists. The latter thinkers' vision of self and language ("...man is the main measure of things in this world and ...language use is the key to human being..."⁴ and it does not reflect reality, rather it constructs it) is attacked by the former. It is because it devaluates the idea of absolute knowledge by rejecting the view that an outer reality exists which we can immediately understand.

³ B. Fay, Introduction to *History and Theory*, edited by B. Fay, P. Pomper and R. T. Vann, 1998, p. 6.

⁴ H. Kellner, Introduction to *A New Philosophy of History*, edited by F. Ankersmit & H. Kellner, 1995, p. 1.

Today we see a different version⁵ of this discussion mentioned above. Following the evolution of historical writing in the twentieth century, *epistemological* questions such as "How can we know about the past? Is objective knowledge possible?" posited in the earlier thought are being challenged by *linguistic* questions "...regarding the form of discourse by means of which historians describe and explain past...".⁶ This so-called 'linguistic turn'⁷ can be taken as a part of a larger 'discursive turn' after the 1960s pointing to the perspectivist character of knowledge since knowers "...never know reality directly as it is in itself; rather, they approach it from their own perspective."⁸ In the last quarter of the twentieth century, we can observe the challenges of the linguistic trend in historical writing which gives emphasis on the *rhetorical character* of writing history. The aim of this thesis is to lay out against those challenges the position of social history, which can be seen as the opposite trend in historiography. I will seek to accomplish this through the analysis of the works of an individual historian, seeming to give emphasis on the *scientific character* of writing history.

The thesis will examine the general attitudes of Eric Hobsbawm as a –social– historian with reference to the history of social history. As it is placed on a more general axis, it does not intend to present a comprehensive study or a critical assessment of all his works. Rather it concentrates on the main discussions upon the

⁵ It must be noted that there exist different tensions in accordance with the broader discussion but cannot be reduced to it. Different answers to the same question result in different trends as in the case of Rankean Scientific model of historical enquiry and of Social History. They agree on the idea that historical reality can be captured but not on what makes it possible and scientific. Whereas the former equates the writing of history to narration, for the latter it is explanation.

⁶ B. Fay, Introduction to *History and Theory*, p. 2.

⁷ There are many precursors for the phrase 'linguistic turn' such as Gustav Bergman's essay of 1953, 'Logical Positivism, Language, and the Reconstruction of Metaphysics' (*A New Philosophy of History*, p. 241) but it can be given White's *Metahistory* (1973) as a conventional date as Brian Fay offers in *History and Theory* (p.2). He also proposes a conventional date for the term 'discursive turn' as Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1963).

⁸ B. Fay, Introduction, p. 2.

nature of history and aims at questioning the place and the position of social history with emphasis on the works (his historical materials and more importantly his writings on the problems of historical writing) of a competent historian.

This far, I hope, why such a preference has been made (to take an individual historian in order to understand one wing in historiography and the general problematic of the area at the same time) should have become clear. Let me explain why I preferred Hobsbawm to make such a study: even if his main area of research can be titled '19. century English labour history', his fields of interest are wide-ranging from industrialisation to revolution(arie)s, from bandits to peasantry, from 'construction of traditions' to the problems of history as a discipline. This list can be extended. Being 'in the business for fifty years' has given him an opportunity to produce in a wide array of subjects.

Although he privileges one trend of writing history and finds one type of historical interpretation most useful, he is open to other trends and orientations in terms of developing his writing. Since he believes in the relationship between past and present and in the relevance of politics to history, he is also heavily interested in the current problems of the world as a social and political commentator. It seems to me fruitful to select him in terms of analysing the discussions on historical writing centring on one historian, although the difficulties of such a study require some restrictions.

We can summarise, for the sake of clarity, the general features of social history, as far as the 'new' form from the 1930s to the 1970s is concerned, in *two* notions, through which this historical approach is demonstrated. These notions prove the

necessity of a relationship between social theory and history: total (in terms of being interested in whole range of human activities) and the explanatory writing of history (in terms of taking into consideration the interdependence of different parts of social phenomena in a social context depending on structural analysis).

Social history "...encompasses social, political, economic, and socio-cultural and intellectual phenomena in broadest sense"⁹ and emphasises social structures and processes of social change. Hobsbawm's works can be evaluated in the same manner. He writes with an all-embracing view, and thinks that history can "...discover the patterns and mechanisms of historical change in general, and more particularly of the transformations of human societies during the past few centuries of dramatically accelerated and widened change."¹⁰ He believes that history is -and must be- always aware of its unlikeness "...even it generalises most effectively", but he adds that in his view "it is worth nothing much if it doesn't generalise."¹¹

The thesis is divided into three main parts: The first part, titled as "*Social History and the Paradigm Shifts in the Historiography of the Twentieth Century*", consists of three chapters. In the first chapter, "Historiography: Endless Oscillation", along the 'nature' of historical writing which creates a swing from one pole to another, I discuss the central problems in historiography today by presenting a concise history of historiography from the nineteenth to the twentieth century.

⁹ G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century - From the Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*, 1995, p. 70.

¹⁰ E. Hobsbawm, *On History*, 1998, p. 41.

¹¹ *ibid.* p. 38.

In the second chapter, "Social History in terms of the Relation Between Social Theory and History", I take into account two leading trends in social history (the *Annales* School and British Marxist Historical Tradition). I try to analyse their evolution after the 1930s in terms of their different attitudes and orientations, or in terms of what we may call 'shifts' from macro-structural analysis to micro analysis, from the emphasis on economy to that on culture, and so on. In the third chapter, "The Problems in and Challenges To Social History", I discuss the general problems and the main shortcomings in the writing of social history. Then I review some responses to them from inward and outward directions such as the cultural turn, micro history, return of politics and of narrative or 'political narrative' -with changes in the meaning of both terms- and the linguistic turn.

In the second part, titled "*A Portrait from the Milieu Making 'History of Society'*", I examine the general tendencies of Eric J. Hobsbawm as a historian in order to comprehend the position of social history in the historiography today more deeply. This part, too, is divided into three chapters. In the fourth chapter, "Writing on the Nineteenth Century", I will give a short presentation of his biography and of his works for an introduction to his way of writing history and a critical review of his trilogy on the nineteenth century.

In the fifth one, "Writing as a 'Participant Observer'", I analyse his writing of twentieth century as a historian and a social and political commentator with critical assessments of *Age of Extremes*, and *The New Century*. In the sixth chapter, "Writing on History: On History", I take into consideration his evaluations of the central problems in history and the trends in today's historiography by focusing on his book,

On History, which consists of several essays on the nature and problems of historical writing.

The third part is titled as "*Social History and Historiography Today in the light of an Individual Historian's Writing of History and Theory of History*". In the seventh and the last chapter, "An Evaluation of Hobsbawm's Historical Writing in terms of the Trends of the Twentieth Century Historiography", by presenting the general attitudes of Hobsbawm as a historian via the previous two chapters I discuss what kind of social history and, in fact, of *history* he is writing and claims to be most valuable. I try, then, to define and place his writing of history in the broader arena of social history, and of historical orientations in terms of the two major opposite attitudes, Rhetorical and Scientific.

Lastly in *Concluding Remarks*, I present the general conclusions emerging throughout the thesis such as the present shift in the 'burning issues' of historical writing from law to presentation and the place of social history in historiography and its position against the challenges as in the individual case of Hobsbawm. After that I question the validity of the challenges towards social history in particular and history as a 'legitimate cognitive enterprise' in general. In the conclusion I discuss, as far as the problem of capturing -historical- reality is concerned, whether those opposite attitudes in the theory of history or history of thought need one another, or not.



***SOCIAL HISTORY AND THE PARADIGM SHIFTS
IN THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY***

Chapter One

Historiography: Endless Oscillation

*"Like history, historiography seems to repeat itself- with variations."*¹ P. Burke.

*"History is in crisis. That is its normal state... Without crisis it stagnates"*² H. Kellner.

Historical writing has always been questioned in many ways and in that sense has never been without disputed questions. There are debates, for instance, about 1) the relationship between individual and collective phenomena (human agency vs. structural conditioning) and partly in relation with this problem about 2) the relationship between the discipline of history and other disciplines, about 3) the truth-telling character of historical writing, and about 4) the problem of 'contemporary relevance' in terms of the position of the historian and in relation with the links between past, present and future. The first three problems will possibly make us ponder the nature of history as a rigorous discipline and become interested in new ones about the peculiarities of 'historical explanation', about the possibility of reflecting the historical reality and of understanding of the totality of human history, and the possibility of any 'valid' method to study historical phenomena. The fourth and the last one makes us aware of moral and ideological components within history writing. It points to the scientific and philosophical concerns of history and its aesthetic dimension, and the position of the historian when s/he writes.

¹ Peter Burke, "History of Events and the Revival of Narrative", in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* edited by P. Burke, 1992, p. 233.

² Hans Kellner, in interview with Ewa Domanska, in *Encounters, Philosophy of History after Postmodernism* by E. Domanska, 1994, p. 49.

Such problems are inherent in historical writing and, in fact, historiography has always discussed them –or more, needless to say- giving emphasis to one or another in different periods, with changing formulations of and changing answers to them in all *new* cases. Since there are no ideal schemes that are valid all the time and in all cases, ‘scientific’ production as a whole always moves through the criticism of the existing paradigm with some premises for making scientific studies. The advancement of historiography traces a similar way: Historiography witnesses ‘historical innovations’ coming through new ways of looking at older problems which “...redefines the field of data or invents new fields of data.”³ However, the *new* becomes an *orthodoxy* marginalising the other(s), if not the total replacement of the old paradigm with the new⁴, to be marginalised in the future by what was subordinated before. A movement: *circular*, in the sense that more or less the same tensions appear in time, and *progressive*, in the sense that it is never a mere repetition, with new formulations and new answers.

When we look at the state of historiography in the last quarter of the twentieth century, we shall see that history writers are becoming more sceptical both of the belief in a ‘single authorised historical method’ and of the view that the totality of human history can be understood within the framework of a ‘single coherent story’⁵. Through poststructuralist thinking, the unproblematic use of the notion of truth or historical reality has become impossible or the use of them has become more

³ H. Kellner, Introduction to *A New Philosophy of History* edited by F. Ankersmit & H. Kellner, 1995, .p. 10.

⁴ The heavy emphasis on one side or its becoming a new ‘orthodoxy’ of course restricts the field of works of the other(s) or marginalises them, but never makes them disappear, even if it tries to do this. Historiography is an area in which one of the different orientations is always at the centre of production. However all orientations continue to survive, and the current stress on one side always changes over time (within a country or all over the world) and differentiates over space (never the same at one point of time in different areas of the world).

⁵ Allan Megill, Introduction to *Encounters*, pp. 1-2.

problematic.⁶ In terms of the transparency of historical texts, the writers of older historiography⁷ were more or less in confidence, but it is today very questionable, on the one hand whether historical texts “...offer a direct and unproblematical access to historical reality”, and on the other that they “...are unmarked by the intentions and critical performances of the subject that created them”⁸ as if they are irrespective of the writer’s own language. Today historians generally admit that historical texts are not transparent since reality is itself subject to change and socially or culturally constructed, and the “historian’s language does not reflect coherence in the past itself, but only *gives* it to the past”⁹.

To look at the ‘aesthetic intervention’ in historiography emerging after the 1970s, it seems to be, in fact, an epistemological intervention to remind that history also has an aesthetic and narrativist dimension (the historian is the one who ‘makes’ history), like all disciplines have, more or less. Social history in the social science-oriented form emphasised, in some cases, ‘structural’ analysis, and the use of explanatory models too much. Heavy emphasis on one pole created the other -again. The need to stress the rhetorical dimension of (historical) writing is related to the increasing awareness of the position of the historian when writing and of the confines of the

⁶ Two names, without discussing whether their way of thinking about capturing historical reality can be called as ‘poststructuralist’ or not, and their books need to be mentioned here: T. Kuhn and his path-breaking *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) from the outside of the discipline, and H. White and his very much discussed *Metahistory* (1973) from the inside. They provided a basis for history, as well as other disciplines especially as in the case of the former, to comprehend that the truth is itself socially and historically conditioned (Kuhn), and that ‘historical reality’ is ‘constructed’ through writer’s ‘aesthetic intervention’ (White). These are interrelated and go hand in hand with the general critique of the notions of ‘science’ and ‘ultimate truth’ by the thinkers what we may call, without any serious doubt, as ‘poststructuralist’ such as Foucault and Derrida stressing on the relationship between power /language and knowledge following the traces of Nietzsche and may be later Sartre, who claim that all ‘scientific’ enterprise to understand the reality is much determined by and constrained with the preconceptions by the writer or the milieu in which he or she writes.

⁷ Here it refers to both Rankean historiography and the heavy structuralist tone of some historians of social history, even if they are rivals and unlike in terms of their thinking about the historical explanation.

⁸ Ankersmit, *History and Tropology*, p. 128-129, quoted in “New Historicism: Postmodern Historiography Between Narrativism and Heterology” by Jürgen Pieters, *History and Theory*, v. 39, No. 1, 2000, p. 25.

⁹ *ibid.* p. 36, again quoted in “New Historicism”, p.27.

project of reflecting reality. In this view, there emerges the possible threat to history as a discipline like some others –social, even natural sciences-, but history is more challenged in that it is offered the reduction of history to the artistic dimension of it, and it is denied the capacity of history to capture historical reality at all.

To go back to the heydays of social history between 1930 and 1970, one can easily notice the growing interrelationship between history and social sciences against the ‘narrower empiricism’ of the preceding dominant paradigm of historical writing. The so-called Rankean historiography of the late nineteenth century provided the ‘professionalisation of historical studies’ through ‘their concentration at universities’, and began to claim that history was a rigorous science based on archival research and the critical use of evidence arising out of such kind of research. This development made the political history, as a coherent narrative, ‘a highly professional skill’ but at the same time “the range of questions asked and of methods used had undeniably been severely narrowed.”¹⁰

Much earlier, in 1891 when Lamprecht in Germany opposed the main premises of conventional historical scholarship : “the central role assigned to the state and the concentration on persons and events”¹¹ and offered a history with an embracing view of almost all human activities, as Robinson did in America a little bit later. The time when the increasing attention was given to ‘social forces’ in a more successful way came in the years of the 1930s, especially after 1945. In the postwar period, historians became open especially to the studies of social sciences, and began to use theoretical tools and methods of the social sciences in the investigation of historical

¹⁰ L. Stone, “History and the Social Sciences in the Twentieth Century”, in *The Past and Present Revisited*, p. 6.

¹¹ G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century*, 1997, p. 31.

phenomena. Two *movements*, which both turned into 'traditions' afterwards, together pushed historians to write 'structural narratives': the *Annales* School and British Marxist Historians.

Social science-oriented history –the term which I prefer to use for the one hinging upon macro analysis and referring to the phase of social history before the 1970s– “.... spanned the methodological and ideological spectrum from quantitative sociological and economic approaches and the structuralism of the *Annales* School to Marxist class analysis”¹² and activated in the journals of *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* (1929) in France and *Economic History Review* and later *Past and Present* (1952) in England. The emergence of a *new social history* originated in France and Britain can be evaluated a very crucial development in historical writing. Social historians, including Marxists, began to develop a relationship to other social sciences like economy, sociology, psychology, geography and demography in earlier phases, recently anthropology and psychology again, and could gain fruitful outcomes from these collaborations.

We can draw the general lines of the *new history* from the 1930s onwards as follows: it tended to be analytic rather than narrative, and thematic rather than chronological. It relied upon different sources or techniques such as statistical information, oral interviews, inquisitions, sociological or psychoanalytic theories, since it aimed at comprehending 'social structures and processes of social change' rather than events. It was much interested in masses, rather than a tiny group of elite. Historians “...were now asked to explain just what set of assumptions and just what causal model of

¹² *ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

change they were using”¹³. For Stone, social sciences thus helped –or forced– historians to define their terms more carefully and define problems and issues. The results were satisfactory and an incentive in many terms but the problems emerged when historiography tended to overemphasise structural explanation at the expense of neglecting ‘living man’, which history has much to do with.

Through the professionalisation of the discipline by the end of the nineteenth century, history used to claim to be ‘scientific’, and historians used to deemphasise history’s rhetorical dimension since there was posited ‘a dichotomy between science and rhetorical dimension’ from that time onwards. This was one of the things that social science-oriented history inherited from the old paradigm. This claim to scientificity and the excessive use of models of social sciences mentioned above were criticised and the premises of social history of the 1950s and 1960s, in that sense, were put into question especially after the 1970s.

The social history in the social science-oriented form was –is today– open to criticism in that it shared in many cases two key notions with the older historiography, stemming from the essentialist view of history: The first was “...the affirmation that history dealt with a real subject matter to which the accounts formulated by historians must correspond”¹⁴ even though some historians admit(ted) that “...this reality could not be grasped directly but, like all sciences, must be mediated by the concepts and mental constructs of historians...” The second one was the “...notion of unilinear time, with the conception that there was continuity and direction in

¹³ L. Stone, “History and ...”, p.17.

¹⁴ G. Iggeres, *Historiography*, p. 3.

history.”¹⁵ The *Annales* studies were, of course, very much aware of the restrictions of such conception of time from the beginning, as in the case of Braudel, who offered a conception of different layers of time, and they never assumed that there was unilinear succession or direction in history. The Postmodernist critique seems to be directed towards such a historiography, which is in confidence with the notion of ‘objective knowledge’ in the positivistic line.

The notion of truth and the view that there is a direct access to the reality have been criticised severely over the last quarter of the twentieth century as we have seen. In fact, they had been put into question much earlier, for instance in the writings of Kant (for the latter view) and of Nietzsche (for the former notion). However, not only reality is without access, but also our cognition of it is without ‘objective elements’ since our means of understanding reality is determined by our historicity and social and cultural constraints. Our understanding both consists of a logical coherence and is also a result of linguistic construction. Thus, in terms of historical investigation, it becomes insufficient to depend on ‘reliable facts’ (as Roquentin does, see *Introduction*, p. 1) since “the data that are to be analyzed are not significantly different in different accounts” but “the modalities of their relationships”¹⁶ is (as Roquentin discerns).

For the postmodernist view the claim that histories are about events does not itself conclude that historical investigation is a rigorous one. Histories do not only talk about events but also about the possible sets of relationships in which those events can be described, and they are not present in the events themselves but only exist in

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁶ H. White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact”, in *History and Theory*, 1998, p. 30.

the historian's mind reflecting on them. History is a product of the historian. For some, in all connotations of the term: "Because of the relation between the historiographical view and the language used by historian in order to express this view- a relation which nowhere intersects the domain of the past- historiography possesses the same and intentional dimension as art."¹⁷

History, 'this most difficult of the disciplines'¹⁸, is less characterised by consensus on methodological rules than natural and social sciences are. That is because "...the nature of explanation obviously differs in historiography from that in the social and natural sciences, because it has to take into account both the intention of its objects of study and also the role of researcher's subjectivity, which is clearly greater in historical studies."¹⁹ Referring to the researcher's subjectivity, it can be said that history has been and can be written for very different purposes and in very different ways so that the borderline between history and myth, history and poetry, history and ideology has often been a fluid one much more than in natural and social sciences.

Today the discipline is fragmented and multicentred: Fragmented, paradoxically, as a result of the goal of writing of total history. It created the opposite in practice - writing in all subjects excluded previously. Multicentred, by means of increasing consciousness of historians about the historicity of and about the contemporary relevance of what they are doing. With growing acceptance of the view that reality is conditioned to change in time and it is socially and culturally constituted, historians became inclined to think that there is no *absolute* truth and there is no *authoritative*

¹⁷ F. Ankersmit, "History and Postmodernism", in *History and Theory*, p. 183.

¹⁸ L. Stone, "History and ...", p. 43.

¹⁹ G. Iggers, *Historiography...*, p. 18.

voice, thus no centre, to speak in the name of it. It is a result of an anthropological understanding of culture, again gained by the interdisciplinary approach of social history in terms of investigating whole range of human activities.

Such kind of changes can be considered to be the *changing face* of social history through different orientations and generations. Social history today is not interested in only structures but also in the relationship between structures and events. It gives much more importance to the multiplicity of method(ologie)s (for instance, not just structural analysis together with quantification but micro analysis of 'localities' through qualitative understanding of *mentalities*). There has been a discernible turn from *macro* to *micro analysis*, from *exterior* (material conditions) to *interior* (human mind), from history seen as a *progressive process without man* to history *experienced by men*.

I evaluate these kinds of turns as 'supplement' to social history, in all connotations – in opposition with one another- of the term: they are supplement in that they are both 'necessary', but 'dangerous' at the same time²⁰, for social history. They have *challenged* the excesses of social science-oriented history tending "... to reduce the study of man, and the explanation of change, to a simplistic, mechanistic determinism based on some preconceived theoretical notion of universal applicability."²¹ They have challenged social history, in order to *adopt* it into the necessities of historical writing in general: to see the general in the unique but without forgetting the unique; making use of the approaches of the other disciplines but trying to stay *sui generis*.

²⁰ J. Scott, "Women's History", *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, p. 50.

²¹ L. Stone, "History and ...", p. 42.

Social history has always had the flexibility to hold new orientations through criticisms, and it, for instance, turned to micro analysis, to narrative²² after the 1970s. At that point I would like to point out that ideas oscillate not only in the sense that they reappear with different faces but also that they are *movable*. One core idea of one system of thinking moves and emerges as a component of the other, even of the opposite ones as we can easily discern in the history of historiography. For instance new historicism is very different from the nineteenth century historicism in the sense that the former questioned the unproblematic representability of the past, which the latter upheld unquestionably. However the social science-oriented historians in this sense stayed under the latter's influence for a long time despite the fact that it emerged against it.

New social historians are more convinced that the past cannot be captured totally not only because it is fragmented, but also because the writer of it touches it from the present through a contemporary way of looking and in the limits of the language he or she uses. What had previously been considered as more or less unchanging is now viewed as subject to a 'cultural construction'. Social and cultural historians in Britain and France are more inclined to accept the view that there is no single authoritative historical method and no coherent past left behind us partly by means of the 'postmodern challenge'. Now let us look at what kind of 'ideas' enter in and move within social history in time in the following chapter.

²²To add, micro historians make use of it differently from the way which a traditional narrativist used to, in terms of the conception of time and analysis.

Chapter Two

Social History in terms of the Relationship Between Social Theory and History

*“From the very beginning, the Annales constituted an international forum for new directions in social history.”*¹ G. Iggers

*“... history is engaged on a coherent intellectual project, and has made progress in understanding how the world came to be the way it is today. Historians in Marx’s tradition have a significant contribution to make to this collective endeavour.”*² E. J. Hobsbawm

Historians generally feel the tension between the desire to recreate the past as much as possible and the urge to interpret it. Although these two are very much interrelated and attached to one another, most of the time they make emphasis on one side with a belief that what they emphasise is actually the ‘historian’s craft’. Social historians came on to the scene claiming that the analysis of all human activities is vital in order to expand the horizons of historical writing besides the main gain of the Rankean historiography -setting professional standards for history. They were concerned with economic, social and cultural aspects of past societies and this “... concern with the whole range of human activity encourages them to be interdisciplinary in the sense of learning from and collaborating with social anthropologists, economists,.....and so on.”³

¹ G. Iggers, *New Directions in European Historiography*, 1984, p. 56.

² E. Hobsbawm, *On History*, 1998, p. x.

³ P. Burke, “Overture: The New History, its Past and its Future” *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, p. 6.

When historians aim to analyse historical events as parts of a whole and in their social context, i.e. in their totality, structural analysis becomes unavoidable. Social history necessitates for historians to use models even when they are interested in 'unique' events. As Peter Burke exemplifies, a narration on the French Revolution is an intellectual construction, 'simplifying the reality to understand it' and expresses it in a form, i.e. model.⁴ Since socio-economic structures and changes cannot be analysed in the same way the traditional historians were accustomed to doing, social history questioned the nature of historical writing relying on –or claiming to do so– describing unique events by narrating, and offered new one instead: analysis of social trends by using the theoretical tools borrowed from other disciplines, especially social sciences.

I

The New History

The *new history* from the 1930s onwards organised its material in an analytical arrangement. It asked the question of *why* rather than *what* and *how*. It was very interested in the relation between man and nature, and man and society. The interrelationship with social sciences provided historians with new opportunities. It created new fields of history like the history of science, history of mass culture, history of social change, history of family, psychohistory and more⁵, and a variety of techniques in accordance with the requirement of interdisciplinary approach. Through new methodology and techniques history could make comparisons over time and space.⁶

⁴ P. Burke, *History and Social Theory*, 1992, p. 27.

⁵ L. Stone, "History and ...", pp. 23-25.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 17.

Despite common features, it is impossible to speak of *one* social history since it differentiated with different orientations and with different trends within the same orientation over time. Yet it is possible to mention that there is a common denominator for all of them: Social history views the past as a multi-dimensional area forcing history to establish close relationships with different arenas, especially with social sciences. In this chapter, I will present the evolution of social history from the 1930s to 1980s, taking into consideration two main orientations⁷ of the *Annales* School in France and Marxist historiography in Britain especially after the World War II. They believed that history was a rigorous discipline and had to collaborate with the social sciences, and the social historian was the one who made a mass of knowledge about human activities a regular and meaningful totality.⁸

Social history tried to embrace the need of the writing 'total history'. Both the *Annales* and the British Marxist tradition were concerned with problem-oriented analytical history and with studying whole range of human activities and had the flag of 'interdisciplinary approach'. They were concerned more with the analysis of structures, rather than the narration of events in its simpler form. The *Annales* tradition aimed at founding a 'common market'⁹, which can provide a basis for understanding of 'totality of social'. The *Annales* historians assigned history the foremost place among the sciences dealing with man, but in a different way than classical historicism did. They wanted to abolish the boundaries between the disciplines in order to integrate them into the "sciences of man", in which not

⁷ No doubt there are other orientations/countries to study in terms of social history. However a full analysis of the others (even these two) is beyond the scope of the thesis. The *Annales* School and British Marxist Historiography are selected not only because the studies of their practionaries and the movements in general have a central importance in understanding social history and historiography in the twentieth century in general, but also because they have a central role in Hobsbawm's historical writing as a specific case.

⁸ Z. Toprak, "Sosyal Tarihin Alanı ve Türkiye Gerçeği", *Toplum ve Bilim*, 1991, p. 88.

⁹ Braudel, "History and Social Sciences", p. 12.

political institutions but other socio-economic and cultural aspects of society, that were formerly subordinated has become important.¹⁰

In the twentieth century the Marxist theory of history was criticised and modified by different thinkers in different traditions, and its limits were put into question by Marxist scholars to be made use of as a model in historical studies which gave some important opportunity to create new perspectives. In England from 1947 until 1956 there existed an officially organised 'Communist Party's Historians Group' with the members such as Maurice Dobb, Rodney Hilton, Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, and Edward P. Thompson about whose studies I will give introductory information later. They achieved their objectives through a new way of looking at the 'masses', they tried to make 'history from bottom *up*'. They could raise questions that were productive for social history and the field of historiography reformulating Marxist theory of history. Whereas the *Annales* historians were especially interested in the pre-industrial world or early periods of industrialisation, British Marxist historians turned their faces to the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They tried to understand the life of the masses in the framework of class struggle.

II

The *Annales* School, The 'French Historical Revolution'¹¹

The *Annales* School is the most important and effective tradition in the French historical writing. It can be also considered as one of the most path-breaking movements in twentieth century historiography. It must be considered as a 'movement' rather than a school since there are divergences between individual

¹⁰ G. Iggers, *Historiography...*, p 53.

¹¹ Burke did use the term to call the movement's success.

members and developments over time¹², as we can reiterate this partly for British Marxist historiography. It, as it is well known, emphasised the interaction between history, the social sciences and the humanities.

The first issue of the journal, *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, which gave the movement its name, was dated 15 January 1929. The founders, Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, were professors in Strasbourg at that time. They had expressed their plan to publish a new journal turning towards social and economic history, rather than a narrower political history with the narration of events since the earlier times of their professorships in Strasbourg. Such a kind of history had predecessors no doubt: They followed Henri Berr (a historian of philosophy), were affected by Durkheimian sociology and the cultural anthropology of Marcel Mauss. The *Annales* from the beginning was a symbol of a 'new kind of history' in terms of a big project of studying almost all aspects of history.

They focused on a comparative history relying on the general themes and problems rather than on documentary analysis; on socio-economic history rather than on political-diplomatic history; on the -long term- evolution of common structures to all geographies and cultures rather than specific and distinct development of individual nations. They turned their attention to 'masses' and their lives, which had been considered as 'passive' and ineffective to historical movement previously, and presented new ways of looking at them.

What is in the *Annales* School seen as a 'paradigm shift' is its claim that all disciplines from sociology to linguistic interested in human activities besides history

¹² P. Burke, *French Historical Revolution, The Annales School, 1929-1989*, 1990, p. 2.

must come together to explain the relationship between man and nature, and among men. Since they were more inclined to understand 'man' under material conditions, they mostly turned to historical geography or demography in earlier periods. They turned in time, without mentioning the predecessors, to the history of mentalities or history of culture, and made give and take with anthropology. All different fields of interest emerged in fact as the outcome of a project of 'total history', which means the comparative analysis of different regions in relation with one another and over the long term.

Even though they affirmed the necessity of starting with the sources and examining these critically, they rejected a narrow, event-oriented narrative history and its way of making use of the sources. What social historians meant with a 'historical source' was different and in fact much broader. They refused one-dimensional time from the past to the future. The *Annales* historians radically modified the conception of time by stressing the relativity and multilayering of it as in the case of Mediterranean by Braudel.

Marc Bloch, one of the two founders of the journal, worked in Strasbourg till 1936 and went to the Sorbonne as a professor of economic history in this year. He can be called as a historian of mentalities as well as an economic historian. In his remarkable *Royal Touch* (1924) he was interested in collective illusions, in king's power to cure as a skin disease. His *French Rural History* (1931) as an earlier example of his interest in peasant communities is a combination of combined the study of rural techniques and rural customs at the same time. In *Feudal Society* (1939-40) he analysed European feudal society from 1300 to 1900 and he took

feudalism as a complex of interpersonal relations, 'a typical form of social organisation' since he believed in the close "...relationship between political order, social structure, mentality, feelings and ideas and that these relationships could not be reduced to a simple formula."¹³ *Historian's Craft* (1949) was published after his death in 1944 in a Nazi concentration camp. It questions the use of and the methodological problems of history in the way a practitioner experiences them.

Lucien Febvre, the other founder, gave his doctoral thesis on the later sixteenth century of Spain in the time of Philip II. The book, *Phillippe II et la Franche-Comté* (1922), is an example of social history of the given region, Franche-Comté. It was not a classical analysis of the politics of the era of Philippe II. He studied the relation between declining mobility and rising bourgeoisie of merchants. For him the conflict between them was not a mere economic one but of ideas and feelings at the same time. He is generally interested in the interaction between nature and man. In *A Geographical Introduction to History* (1925) giving an emphasis between history and geography, he mentioned that there are no necessities but probabilities as far as the relationship between man and his environment is concerned and that nature has got an indirect effect on human societies through social structures and ideologies. He was also concerned with the problem of the complex relation between individual and group, between individual initiative and social necessity. In *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century* (1942-1983) he was interested in the Rabelais case in the sixteenth century and argued that it was not possible to speak of Rabelais' atheism since the mental preconditions to be an atheist were not present in the sixteenth century. In that sense he was critical of projecting modern conceptions onto the understanding of people who lived in the past.

¹³ P. Burke, *French Historical Revolution*, p. 25.

Both Bloch and Febvre were very much aware that there was no –at least one- causality inherent to historical change, and to understand where human beings are going, requires to elaborate on the interrelation among different aspects of society. As Bloch states: “History seeks for causal wave-trains and is not afraid,..., to find them multiple.”¹⁴ To make sense of these human societies, historians must give importance cultural elements as well as material determinants. In that sense the studies of Febvre and Bloch affected “...the history of mentalities as practised from the 1960s onwards by Georges Duby, Robert Mandrou, Jacques Le Goff.”¹⁵

Fernand Braudel was a very influential figure in what P. Burke has called the second generation. His doctoral thesis, *The Mediterranean and Philip II*, was a massive book. It was divided into three parts, each of which exemplifies a different approach to the past with his notion of different layers of time. In the first part he gives the ‘almost timeless history of the relationship between man and environment’ and the ‘gradually changing history of economic, social and political structures’ in the second, and the fast-moving history of events in the last. He defines the sixteenth century of Mediterranean as such an environment ‘that favoured large states like Spanish and Turkish empires’ which dominated the region. This book was a great success in writing a history of man in relationship to environment and also in showing that ‘time moves at different speeds’ as he aimed. It was criticised due to its determinism in the sense that it depicts a world ‘unresponsive to human control’ and fails to show the geo-history of man in motion which is not totally immobile.¹⁶

¹⁴ M. Bloch, *Historian's Craft*, 1953, p. 193.

¹⁵ P. Burke, *French Historical Revolution*, p. 30.

¹⁶ Burke, *French Historical Revolution*, p. 41.

E. Labrousse, who took a significant interest in the ideas of Marx, was influential in the group. Through him the Marxist theory of history began to penetrate into the studies of the *Annales*. He studied the economy of the eighteenth century France with two books. The first, *Esquisse du mouvement des prix et des revenus* (1933 –*The Sketch*) is about the price movements from 1701-1817, and the second, *La Crise de l'économie française* (1944 - *The Crisis*), is about the end of the old regime. The Great Crash had created an interest in the price history. He was interested in both long term economic trends and short term cycles and their relevance to the society as a whole, using concepts, methods, theories of economics such as Kondradieff cycles. For instance he saw the crisis in the 1780s as a precondition for the French Revolution. His studies aroused an interest in statistical techniques used in economy, besides Braudel's analysis of social structures in the long term which gives a way for the quantitative history of the 1960s and 1970s without himself becoming a quantifier.

Since the early 1960s with the development of demography in relation with the explosion of world population and the history of social structure, there existed an increasing use of statistics in historical studies. Most of the studies of the 1960s in French social history were defined by quantification, which gave the opportunity for history to claim to be scientific.¹⁷

Le Roy Ladurie's doctoral thesis *Peasant of Languedoc* (*Les Paysans du Languedoc* 1966) is accepted one of the most important study of quantitative history employing theoretical models. He presents here a 'total history' of a single region over a period

¹⁷ As Le Roy Ladurie 'put in its most extreme form' in his famous and much quoted statement: "... history that is not quantifiable cannot claim to be scientific" in *The Territory of the Historian*, 1979, p. 15.

of more than 200 years. The book was an example of both a comparative study of the historical climate over the long term and of history from below on the evidence of revolts. In this book, even though his extreme claim on the necessity of quantification in historical studies he managed to combine quantitative economic and social history with political, religious and psychohistory.

However, quantification showed its extremity in that it pushed subjects other than socio-economic history to the periphery in the second generation of the *Annales*, which is described by mostly Braudel and partly Labrousse and later Le Roy Ladurie. Demographic history was convenient for understanding general socio-economic structures but not for mentalities. Reactions existed in that sense. Actually it cannot be said that Braudel or Le Roy Ladurie did not recognise the significance of culture in historical change. They did, and in some sense, accepted that cultural components of history can and must be comprehended rather than measured. But these components were more or less repressed. The history of mentalities was launched among historians of the so-called third *Annales* generation and demography and economics began to be suppressed by cultural interests and even semiotics.

In that generation there was no one or subject, which dominated the group and their works, yet there are some leading names and subjects to mention. After the year of 1968 the *Annales* witnessed the rise of the new history of intellect and culture, which differed in its methodological approach from traditional intellectual and cultural history. Duby and Le Goff besides Ladurie were important figures in that period and for the first time group included women members like “Christiane Klapisch, who works on the history of the family in Tuscany in the Middle Ages and the

Renaissance;; Mona Ozouf, the author of a well-known study of festivals during the French Revolution; and Michèle Ferrot, who has written on labour history and the history of women”¹⁸

With the rise of quantification in the historical studies the analysis of economic and social trends somewhat marginalised the studies of the realm of cultural interactions. A so-called anthropological, cultural turn and political turn emerged in the 1970s as a reaction against determinism of demography and economy. G. Duby, for instance, initially being an economic social historian turned to the study of history of mentalities. The shift to culture can be seen in the case of Aries, who investigated the relation between nature and culture through the subjects of childhood and death. As far as the studies of ideology and social imagination we can mention Duby’s later *Three Orders* (1980) in which he draws a relationship between material and mental in the course of social change with a Marxist undertone.

As a medieval historian Duby studied many aspects of feudal society of western Europe. In his *Rural Economy and Country Life* (1968) he presented a detailed analysis of the rural production relations. Inspired by the feminist way of looking he has written two books studying sexual hierarchy: *Le Chevalier, la femme et le pretre* (1981) and *Male Moyen Age* (1991). J. Le Goff is also a medievalist, who has contributed to the history of mentalities from the early 1960s onwards. However his most substantial contribution was made twenty years later with *the Birth of Purgatory* (1984) in which he gave ‘a history of changing representations of the after life’ and argued that “the rise of the idea of purgatory formed a part of ‘the

¹⁸ P. Burke, *French Historical Revolution*, pp. 65-6.

transformation of feudal Christianity', that there were connections between intellectual change and social change."¹⁹

Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie followed this direction. His *Montaillou* came five years after than *The Peasants of Languedoc*. Here he tried to reconstruct the personal details and thoughts of common people, and investigated both the material culture of Montaillou and mentalities of the villagers using inquisition registers for the reconstruction of everyday life and attitudes. He made use of both quantifiable (land registers, official documents on direct and indirect taxes) and non-quantifiable data (chronicles, narratives, records written by contemporaries, trials of heretics kept by inquisition).

Politics or individuals have never been disappeared or rejected in the studies of the group even though they were not understood in the way classical historians did. Bloch's *Royal Touch* is a good example of it. Duby wrote a monograph on a medieval battle, Bouvines, like Furet and Vovelle, who studied on French Revolution. Agulhon in a Marxist framework studied the republic in the village (1789-1851) and political behaviour of ordinary people in village. Duby studied on William Marshall and Le Goff on St. Louis King of France. In these studies, the term of politics was used much more broadly to consist of micro-politics as Foucault called, power relationships in every sphere of life. Moreover their making use of narrative was not the same as classical historians did. For instance what Le Goff and Duby wrote was actually a social and cultural history, in which narrative and individuals played a central role.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 72.

In the 1980s the vision of 'total' history which occupied three generations of *Annales* historians has been laid to rest, and social history turned its face to micro analysis. Micro-historians try to open history up to peoples, who would be left out by other methods of social history in order to elucidate historical causation. It accentuates individual lives and events. It is a practice, which is essentially based on the reduction of the scale of observation, but also on intensive study of documentary material. By altering the scale of observation it aims at getting new factors and meanings from the phenomena previously studied.

C. Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* is one of the best examples of micro history which explores the intellectual and spiritual world of one individual but aimed at developing a general hypothesis about the character of the peasant culture of preindustrial Europe. Yet Ginzburg's involvement with the *Annales* studies is with a measure of detachment from them. In the Introduction to the book, he expresses his reservations about the quantitative studies of mentality, which has made masses *silent* if not ignored, with numbers and anonymity.²⁰ He also mentions the problems in the term 'collective mentality' in the sense that it presents a homogenous and classless picture of culture as in the case of Febvre's Rabelais in which he hold fast to speak of 'the sixteenth century man'.²¹ He rather prefers to use the term 'popular culture', which offers a notion of class structure.

Microhistorical method in general "breaks with the traditional assertive, authoritative form of discourse adopted by historians who present reality as objective."²² However

²⁰ C. Ginzburg, Carlo, *The Cheese and The Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, translated by John and Anne Tedeschi, (1980) 1992, p. 14

²¹ *ibid.* 18.

²² G. Iggers, *Historiography...*, p. 109.

this does not mean that it offers a kind of 'postmodern idealism', which proposes that there is nothing than the author's text, rather and conversely it aims at capturing actual history with the important details subordinated before at the expense of expense of generalisation but without forgetting that what the historian presents does not reflect the reality as it is (since it is not possible in any sense, the past is a 'lost world' and our conceiving it is very much confined to the fragmentary sources).

Microhistory no doubt is the outcome of the collaboration between anthropology and history. There are many similarities in the studies of micro historians and interpretative anthropologists, but the formers, have "not rejected the consideration of social differentiation in the same way as interpretative anthropology but regards it as essential to have as formal a reading as possible of actions, behaviour, social structures, roles and relationships."²³ Social historians have turned to micro analysis as a means of illuminating structures. Yet such a collaboration made historians aware of the advantages in the reduction in scale, to understand not only the contours but also the content of the reality, and also of the fact that there is a dialectical relationship between events and structures. In effect the traditional opposition between events and structures is being replaced by a concern for their relationship. Microhistory gives "...a new kind of narrative might cope better than the old with the demands of structural historians, while giving a better sense of the flow of time than their analyses generally do."²⁴

In that sense changes can be considered as not a break from the ideal of totality, but maybe a way to accomplish it. This concern, the concern for totality, is probably

²³ G. Levi, "On Microhistory", in *New Perspectives On Historical Writing*, p. 105.

²⁴ P. Burke, "History of Events and the Revival of Narrative", *ibid.* p. 240.

what affected Marxist historians most. For Hobsbawm “the Marxist (and vulgar-Marxist) influence to history can be best evaluated in terms of a part of a general tendency to transform history to the social sciences...”²⁵ which provided a convergence between *Annales* and Marxist historiography under the title of social history.

III

British Marxist Historians: “*The Historians’ Group*”

The materialist conception of history “...is essentially directed against the belief that ‘ideas, thoughts, concepts produce, determine and dominate men, their material conditions and real life’”²⁶ as Marx stated: “Men make their own history, ..., but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past.”²⁷ Even though politics and culture are not merely seen as superstructure or individuals are passive agents since there is a class struggle with living men and “every class struggle is a political struggle”²⁸ in Marx’s own writings, the orthodox understanding of Marxist theory reduced it to a simple base-superstructure in many cases in the twentieth century.

In that sense one of the common problematic of the British Marxist historians was to overcome ‘the economic determinism of the base-superstructure model’. They also shared a ‘common *historical* problematic’:²⁹ “the issue of the origins, development,

²⁵E. Hobsbawm, *On History*, p. 192.

²⁶*ibid.*, p. 211.

²⁷K. Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, p.

²⁸K. Marx, *Communist Manifesto*, Part 1

²⁹ However it must be stated that the position of Hobsbawm is somewhat different. He sees the “...major impact which Marx’s own specific ideas have had in history and the social sciences in general is almost certainly that of the theory of ‘basis and superstructure’, that is to say of his model of a society composed of different ‘levels’ which interact.” *On History*, p. 201.

and expansion of capitalism... as social change in the broadest sense.”³⁰ They tried to make not simply ‘class analysis’ but *class struggle analysis*. Their studies were in general “...in the context of historically specific class relations and confrontations, that is , as history from perspective of the bottom *up*” which is seen as important to pursue “a political strategy,... referring to the making of a democratic and socialist historical consciousness.”³¹ Culture was not merely seen ‘superstructural’ but an integral dimension of the class struggle as in the case of Hill’s works on the social history of *ideas*.

Maurice Dobb, like all the other Marxist historians I will mention later, was a member of English Communist Party. He was a economist, who has great contribution to Marxist theory. His main contribution was in the way that he revived and developed the discussions about the transition from feudalism to capitalism . The theory Dobb offers was that of class structure and struggle, what we may call as ‘class determination’. In *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (1946) he claims that feudalism is a totality of production relations and was not diminished as soon as money economy developed instead of natural economy. Accordingly he was challenged with Sweezy, who claimed that the collapse of feudalism was due to the development of foreign trade. His thoughts affected the following Marxist historians in many ways.

Christopher Hill studied the seventeenth century, especially the revolution of 1640, which he calls a ‘bourgeois revolution’ in *The English Revolution 1640* (1940). Such an explanation strongly contrasted with the so-called ‘Whig interpretation’, which

³⁰ H. Kaye, *British Marxist Historians: An Introductory Analysis*, 1984, p.5.

³¹ *ibid.* pp. 246-7.

presents the history of England as an uninterrupted and peaceful process. Hill evaluated the civil war between 1640-48 as an important challenge to the regime, which still had a feudal character and such a challenge gave a way for a new class to get power and then for capitalism to develop. He has shown that those challenges were class struggles not just in economic or political terms, but rather social in the broadest sense.

Rodney Hilton was also a medieval historian studying the structure of rural society in the Middle Ages. He was interested in feudal production mode, peasantry and the uprising of people. In his *Bond Man Made Free: Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381* (1973) and *English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages* (1975) he took feudalism not only as a stabilised structure, which was divided into classes but rather a contradictory social formation, which resulted in class struggles within it. They are important in the sense that they exemplified 'a history from the bottom up' in which peasants with their resistance or their uprisings were considered to be active agents in the course of history.

Eric Hobsbawm,³² firstly known as a labour historian, produced many books, articles, and pamphlets as a historian and a committed communist. He has made crucial contributions in different fields of study and written about different geographies ranging from Europe to Latin America and the Mediterranean. Although he has focused on the nineteenth century, Hobsbawm has also written on the seventeenth, eighteenth and twentieth centuries. His numerous articles and books especially on labour history, peasant studies, and world capitalist development can be

³² We will have a detailed presentation of the history of his historical writing and of his works in the second part.

taken as important examples of the new social history and the history of the dominated classes. This is partly because class-struggle analysis through the history from the bottom up has been central to Hobsbawm's historical studies and also, "...as a result of this, he has 'opened up' new areas of study, such as 'primitive rebels', and transformed old ones, e.g. labour history and even, to some extent, world history."³³

E. P. Thompson and his *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) have "...been important in effecting a reconstruction of the social history of the Industrial Revolution and, along with Eric Hobsbawm's work, has transformed the writing of labour history." What was important in Thompson in terms of Marxist historiography was his insistence on tackling with "the historical and theoretical problems of class, its formation, class struggle and consciousness and, in such terms, consciously pursued an alternative to the base-superstructure model..."³⁴

But his alternative was not an idealism or a simple voluntarism in place of economic and/or technological determinism. He tries to understand class struggle as 'the process of history' and formulates class analysis 'as class-struggle analysis' since class cannot be defined as an abstract term but a *historical category* - describing *people in relationship over time*. He gives importance to the term of experience because it presents a mediation between 'social being' and 'social consciousness'. He attacks Althusserian thought in his famous essay, "The Poverty of Theory", as a kind of structuralism, which cannot handle the problem of *experience*. As a cultural materialist, who gives importance to culture both as a way of struggle and as a part

³³ Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians*, p. 132.

³⁴ *ibid*, p. 168.

of 'real totality', he thinks "that if the dialectic between social being and social consciousness is displaced from our analysis then we have completely abandoned the Marxist tradition."³⁵

But P. Hirst in an Althusserian manner criticises Thompson in that for him "history is a matter of 'finding out', but no definite enquiry can 'find out' this real totality which is so central to his category of capitalism."³⁶ Although he thinks that Thompson is right to insist on the limitations of theory, and to stress the role of what he calls 'morality' and 'values' in socialism, it does not mean that it is necessary to quit theory³⁷: "The 'concrete' as an expression of the 'totality' can only be apprehended by means of theory."³⁸ He remembers Marx's recognition that every theory is in fact an abstraction of essential but nevertheless partial aspects of the whole, and seems to conclude that since theory is necessary but presents the whole only partially, we can neither find out nor reflect this 'real totality', that is a kind of relativistic conclusion.

The British Marxist historians commonly argued that *social* relations of production are simultaneously economic, political, cultural and moral and class relations are 'political' in that they always involve domination and subordination, struggle and accommodation. As J. Tosh also pointed out: "Marxist theory is not just 'history from below': Struggles between classes are ultimately resolved at the political level, and it is through the control of the state that new dispositions of class power are sustained..."³⁹ They, for instance Hobsbawm and Thompson, viewed capitalism as

³⁵ H. Kaye, *British Marxist Historians*, p. 192.

³⁶ P. Hirst, *Marxism and Historical Writing*, 1985, p. 64.

³⁷ In fact what Thompson offers is not to quit theory but to accept the importance of real history. He rightly argues that "it not only tests theory, it reconstructs theory", in *British Marxist Historians*, p. 193.

³⁸ P. Hirst, *Marxism and Historical Writing*, p. 64.

³⁹ J. Tosh, *In the Pursuit of History*, 1984, p. 145.

both an economic and value, or attitudinal, system, each part dependent upon the other and both operating through a wide range of political institutions. But they do not view such operation as purely mechanistic but as a force whose progress and impact has been subject to variation and the intrusion of human agency. Such rescue operations of human agency have formed a significant part of what has been termed 'the new social history'. We also witness the history of women, which went hand in hand with the development of the history of labour. In the 1970s and 1980s a great deal of women's history dealt with the position of women in industrialising process with new 'readings', as in the cases of Sally Alexander⁴⁰, Sheila Rowbothom⁴¹ and Joan Scott⁴².

Marxism involves both the application of a *theoretical tool* to understand the 'mechanisms of human societies' in dialectical terms and a *political commitment* to the transformation of these societies arising from insight into the objective exigencies of the historical situation. Because of this twentieth-century Marxist historical writing especially in England both tackles the reformulation of theoretical construction and takes into consideration the applicability of these into the current practical political problems. Marxist historiography in the 1970s with cultural studies was transformed by the events of the late sixties and early seventies.

The problematic relationship between structure and agency, experience and ideology, theory and practice were taken into consideration "...to redefine social struggle, and

⁴⁰ S. Alexander, "Women, Class and Sexual Differences in the 1830s and 1840s: Some Reflections on the Writing of a Feminist History", *History Workshop*, no. 17, pp.125-51, 1984; with A. Davin & E. Hostettler, "Labouring Women: A Reply to Eric Hobsbawm", *History Workshop*, no. 8, pp. 174-82, 1979.

⁴¹ S. Rowbothom, *Women, Resistance and Revolution: A History of Women and Revolution in the Modern World*, 1974.

⁴² J. Scott, "Women in The Making of the English Working Class.", in *Gender and the Politics of History*, pp. 68-90, 1988.

to articulate new forms of resistance appropriate to a democratic and socialist politics in an advanced capitalist society.”⁴³ Marxist studies turned their attention away from anonymous social processes to focus on the forms of these changes in the consciousness of those who experienced them. The stress culture also signifies a turn away from so-called ‘scientific methods’, which objectivity human relations, toward approaches that yield understanding of the qualitative elements.

In the process of re-examination feminist historians played an important role. The names like Hall, Alexander, Rowbotham, Taylor, etc., “... saw socialism and Marxism as providing a point of departure for understanding the subordination of women under capitalism, but they argued that such modes of thought had at best only implicitly suggested ways to analyse women’s position in society and must be rethought in light of questions raised by feminist theory and practice.”⁴⁴ Women’s history began to question the relative priority given to “his-story” as opposed to ‘her-story’. As feminist historians have undertaken to produce new knowledge, they have necessarily called into question the adequacy not only of the substance of existing history which is centred on male, but also of its conceptual foundations and epistemological premises around which professional organisations are structured hierarchically with dominant styles to exclude some.

In the cultural studies of the 1980s, where structuralism and semiotics were deeply ensconced, the shift was expressed through an intensified interest in feminism, theories of race and ethnicity, and critical appropriations of poststructuralist and

⁴³ D. Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left and the Origins of Cultural Studies*, 1997, p. 3.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 194.

postmodernist theory. The idea that language played a constitutive role in social behaviour directly challenged the cultural materialism of social historians such as Thompson.

IV

Reactions

There existed some challenges to the economic and social determinism of some Marxists, the materialist determinism of some of the Annalists and econometric and sociological determinism of quantitative historians in the arena of social history and from other historians. These excessive features of social history were tried to be corrected by means of new trends. Since the mid 1970s, there was a trend in social history which has been to stress the role of consciousness and to attempt to grasp the qualitative essence of historical situations. Culture, defined as the capacity for symbolic thought, is seen not supplementary to, but an intrinsic ingredient of, human thought in the eyes of the practitioners of both micro history and Marxist cultural studies. 'Such innovations' can also be considered as a result of the idea of capturing 'totality of the social' which developed many different fields of study and provided a broader methodological perspective and a variety of techniques for the use of sources.

Marxist theorists since the 1920s have increasingly pointed to a Marx who emphasised the role of conscious human activity and recognised the fundamental difference between history and nature and Marxist historiographers were even more keenly aware of the limits of empiricism and quantification in social science. The possible extremism inherited in Marxist theory in terms of economic determinism

could be and, in fact, was corrected to some extent by the historians in the British Marxist tradition such as Christopher Hill, E. J. Hobsbawm and E. P. Thompson.

As Hobsbawm stated it "... was the French tradition of historiography as a whole, steeped in the history not of the French ruling class but of the French *people*, which established most of the themes and even the methods of grassroots history..."⁴⁵ The *Annales* tradition has not only deepened our knowledge of the past, but also provided tremendous methodological insights into showing how innovative use can be made of familiar forms of documentation and how new questions about the past can be formulated.

Eric Hobsbawm, Edward Thompson, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and the rest, from differing starting-points and with different historical objectives in view, have all been able to demonstrate how imagination can interact with scholarship to broaden our view of the past under the title of social history. It could manage to take many under its title, but as we have seen, this process was not without problems. What is seen as most problematic in social history and to some extent in history is the subject of the following chapter.

⁴⁵ Hobsbawm, *On History*, p.269.

Chapter Three

The Problems In and Challenges To Social History

*"It may be that the time has come for the historian to reassert the importance of the concrete, the particular, the circumstantial, as well as the general theoretical model and procedural insight..."*¹ L. Stone.

*"It does not matter whether the world is conceived to be real or only imagined; the manner of making sense of it is the same."*² H. White

I

Social science-oriented history applied rigid models of social sciences to history and began to use a quantitative type of formalisation. As we have seen, some reactions came to the arena against the tendency to identify formalisation with quantification which has been prevalent from the 1960s onwards. The reactionaries claimed that with this tendency history has lagged paradoxically behind the other social sciences since it seemed to quit its general premise to depict what was actually lived as much as imagination allows it to do so. According to some critiques "...both social science and Marxist historiography showed little interest in the existential aspects of everyday life."³ With an aim to produce a coherent explanation of social change in the past, social history with quantification has reduced itself to the analysis of social structures sometimes at the expense of saying almost nothing about what was happened in the past. Febvre restated in one of his articles the well-known comment on the students of from the one of the important high schools in France in that they

¹ L. Stone, "History and the Social Sciences", p.43.

² H. White, an interview with E. Domanska, in *Encounters*, p.

³ G. Iggers, *Historiography*, pp. 98-99.

‘know everything but nothing else’, and complained about the frontiers among the different disciplines which prevent historians from working freely and usefully in order to make sense of what they learnt.⁴ However he may not have referred to the view that historians do not need to learn historical facts any more. In some cases structural impersonal analysis with excessive socio-economic emphasis resulted in the elimination of actual history and political issues and in that sense some traditional historians like G. Himmelfarb seem to be right in their warnings.

It can be said that this -to use solely quantitative methods to interpret the conditions of living man and woman- is also a problem for social sciences. They sometime fell into a-historical mechanistic explanations through the use of quantitative analysis. But “in the final analysis, the social sciences deal with human relationships, which must be understood qualitatively, although quantitative data are useful in defining the contours of these relationships.”⁵ Stone drew attention, in that sense, to the dangers of the quantification of historical data with the claim to be scientific, disregarding the need to understanding the historical context. History is also a ‘discipline of context’, for some mainly, and must use qualitative methods for this reason.

Stone also finds problems in other new trends in historical writing. For him there is a problem with psychohistory postulating that a theory of human behaviour which transcends history exists and degrading it into a base providing only data to prove the validity of the such a theory. He finds such kind of determinism in the current French scholarship making use of ‘a single one-way hierarchy of causation’ with three levels. The first is infrastructure with economic and demographic parameters as

⁴ L. Febvre, *A New Kind of History*, *A New Kind of History* ed. P. Burke, p. 31.

⁵ L. Stone, “History and ...”, p.

prime movers of the historical process (he may have in mind, for instance, Ladurie whose later turn to cultural and somewhat narrativist history he welcomed). Then the structure with political organisation and political power and lastly the superstructure (the mental and cultural system of beliefs). He evaluated such a causation as an obstacle for history since it blocks off “...any possibility that historical explanation may, in fact, be a much messier and more loose-ended process.”⁶

Stone wanted to warn historians about the reductionism inherent in these attempts to make history a social science in its pure mechanistic form, which even the social sciences tend to refuse, by exemplifying the limitations and dangers of them. Some traditional historians like Himmelfarb are also discontented with the studies of ‘history from below’ disregarding the role of individuals in the course of history. Such kind of warnings were internalised by many historians turning towards a history more oriented to an anthropological understanding, towards micro analysis and becoming more aware of the element of art in what they are doing.

II

Revivals as Corrections

For Stone there is a ‘revival of narrative’ and one of the prime examples is Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie’s *Montaillou*, an account of life in a village in the Pyrenees in the early fourteenth century. However it is “not what Gibbon, Macaulay, or Ranke would have understood by narration—a story developed chronologically over the course of years, so that the end of the period is significantly different from the beginning. In Montaillou we have exactly the opposite, not so much a story as a

⁶ L. Stone, *ibid*, p. 18.

moment in the Hegelian sense, in which the course of history is stopped in order to capture its essence, as in a still photograph.”⁷

Therefore, the return to narrative does not mean that this trend refuses the view that social structures determine and limit the activities of human agency. Historians turned to narration but “...there were few attempts to return to the traditional narrative with its stress on a chronologically sequential order of events and its focus on elites.”⁸ We have also been witnessing the return to politics as a way of broadening of the scope of historical studies. On the one hand, many historians like Lawrence Stone or Simon Schama get pleasure from the *return of the narrative*, on the other hand, with the studies of some multi-directional social scientists like Theda Skocpol, Charles Tilly and Michael Mann an approach, which can be called as *bringing the state back in*⁹ came into arena.

Through these two movements ‘political narrative’ returns. Besides it, for many historians history “...must turn to the conditions of everyday life as they are experienced by common people.”¹⁰ Microhistory has come for this purpose, “...not as an alternative to analyses of large-scale social and political processes but as a necessary supplement” to them.¹¹ It is a ‘supplement’, again in its all connotations of the term. It not only does what the other to be supplied do not do in principle, but also shows that what the other can never do is crucial to do.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp 96-7.

⁸ G. Iggers, *Historiography*, p. 201.

⁹ H. Berktay, “Özgül Tarihler ve Evrensel Dil Sorunu”, *Toplumsal Tarih*, no. 22, 1995, p.12.

¹⁰ G. Iggers, *Historiography*, p. 102.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 114.

Women's history challenged the authoritative centralisation of history on the subject of 'the politics of European man' and opened new areas of study. In the structures of societies the role of symbols -especially language- is being accepted more. For instance according to Lynn Hunt, the politics of the Revolution was not a mere expression of underlying economic and social interests but rather, "...through their language, their imagery, and their everyday political activities, the revolutionaries had participated in the reshaping of society." ¹²

I evaluate such changes, developments, corrections or even challenges as a part of inner dynamic or a result of evolution of social history in time. As E. Hobsbawm has suggested "...the new history of men and minds, ideas and events may be seen as complementing rather than as supplanting the analysis of socio-economic structures and trends"¹³ even if they tend to supplant it. It is a 'shapeless container', as he calls it, "from changes in human physique to symbol and ritual, and above all for the lives of *all* people from beggars to emperors"¹⁴, and making use of many sources and methodologies of different kinds in order to understand such a variety of subjects.

Some historians evaluate this variety in terms of subject and methods, as a degradation since they see a 'postmodernist' undertone¹⁵ in them eliminating a rational criteria for historical method. Some others, who feel the conservative tension in such kind of evaluation have welcomed or even found this variety necessary since they question the possibility of one authoritative method.

¹² G. Iggers, *Historiography* ..., p. 128.

¹³ G. Iggers, *New Directions in European Historiography*, p. 186.

¹⁴ Hobsbawm, *On History*, p. 249.

¹⁵ On the one hand the idea of capturing 'the totality of social' can be evaluated as 'scientific', therefore as a mythology for defenders of postmodernism. On the other hand, the variety of methods to realise it is criticised from the opposite angle. This may also be related to the 'evolutionary character' of social history.

III

Postmodernist Challenge

The idea of a regular progression through a uniform and predictable series of stages was put into question in the 1970s and the 1980s which "...were almost universally years of crisis for the prevailing optimistic belief that the world would be rapidly and radically transformed along revolutionary lines."¹⁶ Kuhn's paradigms in science, White's tropes in history and the emergence of interpretivism especially through the anthropological studies, which point to the relativist construction of knowledge and the invalidity of the grand theories in the social sciences, all of these emphasise the rhetorical dimension of knowing, "the way that forms of discourse deeply affect what (is claimed to be) known."¹⁷ The claim of objective knowledge and of subject to understand it were challenged since knowledge and self (identity) are culturally conditioned and subject to variation in time. In that sense the very idea of humanity as a central subject, and any universal form of human identity were attacked.

Nietzsche had already in his early writings, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) and *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (1874), denied the possibility of and questioned the utility of historical research and scholarly historiography with the view that the past exists for the sake of life and by means of the demand that history be a science this utility is reversed since "life is no longer the sole ruler or master of knowledge of past."¹⁸ He wants to revive the plastic power of the historian. For him "only if history can bear being transformed into a work of art, that is, to become a pure art form, may it perhaps preserve instincts or even arouse them."¹⁹ Just like

¹⁶ P. Burke, *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, p.93.

¹⁷ B. Fay, Introduction to *History and Theory*, p.2.

¹⁸ F. Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (1874), p. 21.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 39.

Nietzsche, some of thinkers of the twentieth century contradict the analytic trend in history, what might be called the 'scientific mode of history', which is both defined by the professionalisation of the nineteenth century historiography and by social history with strict scientific claims. Some thinkers from the 1960s onwards questioned the possibility of objective knowledge, and pointed to the lag between rhetoric and epistemology as Nietzsche did.

Postmodernist thinking²⁰ questions the functioning of science and of scientific information itself, since it is claimed that science is not only related to a logical construction but also to a 'discursive one'. Science as a discourse is socially constructed and historically determined. What we say and how we say it are interrelated (because there is no clear distinction between form and content)²¹, and determined by our social and political preconceptions. The Postmodernist view, in that sense, focuses on the incongruity between present and past²², rather than on past itself. It does not see the past as a coherent homogenous whole, but see some disintegrated and multicentred ways of living in it, and defines the nature of (social and historical) reality in terms of *differences* rather than similarities, like historicism does especially in its new form and unlike social history does especially in its social

²⁰ The term 'postmodernism' is very much disputable not just in terms of what it means but also in terms of whose work is postmodern. On the one hand, for instance, some see postmodernism as a way of life, a kind of art, a kind of critical thinking as an advanced form of modernism (Eagleton or Giddens) whereas it is generally seen as a radical break. On the other some called as 'postmodernist' by others, since they criticise the premises of modern thinking and world severely, do not prefer to call them as such in the case of White. It may well be because they generally criticise the universal authoritative claims of modernity in general, of scientific production in particular, not totally reject them –and they may think that postmodernism does or will do the latter. However the postmodernist critique of science can be evaluated as 'ascientific rather than antiscientific' since it tries to deconstruct the mechanism of scientific production, not to reject science itself.

²¹ Like White states: "If truth presents itself to us as statements, as utterances, the form of the utterance is as important as the content.", in *Encounters*, p. 24.

²² Unlike Rankean historiography, social historians always tend to accept the relationship between past and present in the sense that historians 'construct' history in accordance with the present needs as in the case of Febvre, accordingly postmodernist view, but with an emphasis on its capability as a rational enterprise. Postmodernist critique is here very much affected from Nietzsche in terms of the possibility of historical research, rather than of the utility problem.

science-oriented form. The historians began to be aware that modernisation is not a unitary process, but expresses itself differently in differing social settings with different cultural traditions as a phenomenon.

Postmodernism offers as a general premise that there is no objective, neutral and solely truth-generating theory of cognition. Not only the phenomenon expresses itself differently but also "...language constitutes the knowable world, limits the ways in which we can know and represent it, and offers us natural what is in fact conventional."²³ From the perspective of language theory, the text has no reference to an external reality, but is contained within itself. This is true for not only literary but also historiographical texts.²⁴

In historiography White comes with the claim that there is "no narrative that ever displays the consistency of a logical deduction"²⁵ and states that "history differs from the sciences precisely because historians disagree, not only over what are the laws of social causation that they might invoke to explain a given sequence of events, but also over the question of the form that a 'scientific' explanation ought to take."²⁶ He insists upon the necessity to recognise 'the fictive element in their narratives'. He does not think that it is the degradation of historiography to the status of ideology or propaganda, but rather a 'higher level of consciousness'.

To repeat the critique of historical realism has been linked to a critique of modern society in that it presents the ideal of *progress* and its criteria as if they are 'universal

²³ P. Burke, "Overture", in *New Perspectives*, p. 14

²⁴ H. Kellner, *Encounters*, p. 55.

²⁵ H. White, in *Encounters*, p. 19.

²⁶ H. White, *Metahistory*, 1973, p.12.

truths', which are the absolute ones to be applied to all kind of human societies. This critique of the view defined with the notion of 'unitary history' comes against social history with 'metahistories'. Postmodernist historiography emphasises the impossibility of reaching objective reality and of 'absolute' understanding of it. It defines the role of language in thinking as one of *creating* it, and claims in the most extreme case, that there is no 'reality' other than this discursive form. For historiography it means, to repeat, that history is only the product of the historian.

This is actually true in the sense that "...the questions asked by each generation of historical writing reflect, inevitably, the subjects they are interested in"²⁷ but it does not mean that neither this 'interdependence' prevents making sense of the historical facts in the way of capturing reality, nor the 'real' is non-existent other than our representations of it. Carr expresses better with an analogy: "It does not follow that, because a mountain appears to take on different shapes from different angles of vision, it has objectively either no shape at all or an infinity of shapes."²⁸

It is clear that scientific knowledge does not come easy since reality is not attained directly but through mediation, and *approaching* the reality always requires continious discussion. Thomas Kuhn discusses the impossibility of *cumulative absolute* knowledge. For him scientific production is not absolute because science is a historically and culturally conditioned discourse among people, who are in agreement about the rules that govern their discourse. It is not cumulative because it advances with revolutionary episodes which begin with the 'awareness of something wrong' opening "... a period in which conceptual categories are adjusted until the

²⁷ C. Hill, "Tarih, geçmiş suçlara ilişkin yalanlar mı demektir?", *Tarih ve Toplum*, no. 74, 1990, p.9.

²⁸ E. H. Carr, *What is History?*, 1963, p. 30.

initially anomalous has become the anticipated”²⁹ and conclude with the replacement of the older paradigm in whole or in part by the new. As Karl Popper also poses convincingly, it “...is not the result of laws but of the best one of existing hypotheses; it is temporary knowledge rather than permanent”³⁰ in that sense.

Today historians are inclined to reject that it is not possible to say that there is a single picture that may be said to be true to the exclusion of all others, but to accept that there are only a multitude of ‘coherences’ of different orders and on different scales. Even though it starts with empirically validated facts or events, historical investigation necessarily requires imaginative steps to place them in a coherent story. This makes history the product of the historian. As J. Scott states, reality may not be ‘merely’ a text, but it can only be attained through language³¹, through the very language of a common discourse, and in that sense this process is related to ‘construction’ rather than ‘reflection’.

IV

To conclude it must be pointed out that there was no radical break between the older social science history and the new cultural history or microhistory, since they are the *new* forms of it. However “...the center of gravity shifted from structures and processes to cultures and the existential life experiences of common people.”³² The link with the social sciences has not been broken.. but the nature which this relationship should take has been re-examined. For the practitioners of microhistory, the historian deals with a real subject matter. Their criticism of the social science-

²⁹ T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1962, p. 64.

³⁰ J. Tosh, *In the Pursuit of History*, p. 129.

³¹ J. Scott,

³² G. Iggers, *ibid.*, p. 100.

oriented history is not that such kind of history is desirable or useful but that the generalisations made do not hold up when tested against the concrete reality of the small-scale life, which they claim to explain.

Historians have begun to question the relationship of science to reality via postmodernist critique but not the possibility of a rational scientific discourse yet. Some of them like Natalie Davis admitted that invention occupies a crucial place in the reconstruction of the past, but they did not mean that this invention is the arbitrary creation of the historian but follows the 'voices of the past', as Davis calls.³³ Through the anthropological understanding the relativity of knowledge and therefore the impossibility of absolute knowledge has begun to be discussed. C. Geertz, one of the gurus of the anthropologists, sees all anti-relativism as a dangerous tendency to see some cultures as hierarchically superior to others.

Historians do not go further as he does. For instance Stone, even though he emphatically rejected the illusion of 'coherent scientific explanation' in history, nowhere suggested that historical narrative, despite its necessarily literary form, surrenders its claim to rational inquiry and realistic reconstruction. They try to find a kind of formalisation and generalisation, which allows for the possibility of comparison between cultures but does not necessarily imply the destruction of otherness.

Postmodernist historiography turned our attention to the excessive claims of 'scientific discourse' of any kind of historiography -including social history- in particular, and the Enlightenment discourse in general. Through such awareness

historians have gained much insight. However there are serious doubts of some historians about the extreme claims of this critique. Historians do not have so much confidence in the truth telling capacity of any 'narrative' about reality, but does it have to mean that historians must quit the need to recreate and interpret the reality, or does it mean that they have to accept that the distinction between fact or fancy is so much blurred that they cannot have any criteria to distinguish a more truthful and better representation of reality? If the answer to the latter question is 'yes', historians have to tackle with dangerous results of increasing 'abuse of history' in practice, as some historians like Hobsbawm have warned.

Every text has a *deconstruction* element within it to reconstruct the text again, as postmodern thinking purports. What about the reconstruction? There will be something *new* to be offered, and what is offered has not necessarily to be a new dogma but it can be a possible way to reach a wider understanding. It is possible to reconstruct 'social history with scientific premises' and enlightenment thinking in general, and as seen there are some successful attempts in that way. Let us now turn to the specific adventure of Hobsbawm as a historian in this sense, and look at his position against such developments and challenges.

³³ G. Iggers, *Historiography...*, p. 119.



A PORTRAIT FROM THE MILIEU
MAKING 'HISTORY OF SOCIETY'

Chapter Four

Writing On the Nineteenth Century

*"...issues in the philosophy and theory of history are best explored by taking real and substantive bits of historical prose for examination, and working out ideas in and through these examples."*¹ Brian Fay.

Hobsbawm's first book, *Labour's Turning Point, 1880-1900*, was published in 1948. If it is taken as a point of departure, therefore he has been writing –history- more than half a century. He has been producing unceasingly as a historian and as a political and social analyst. He has always been contact with the members of different disciplines of social sciences from different nationalities and as a result been very much involved in different -historical- works and aware of different trends in historiography.

For these reasons he may well be evaluated as an important representative of the broader arena of social history of the second half of the twentieth century, despite the fact that he must be evaluated in the tradition of British Marxist historiography². I hope that he will give us a way, with his 'openness' in terms of wide-ranging interests and of international scope of academic relations, to understand the major premises of social history and its evolution in terms of different generations within it and of the challenges directed towards it more deeply. He will also provide us, thus,

¹ B. Fay, "The Linguistic Turn and Beyond In Contemporary Theory of History", *History and Theory*, 1998, p. 1.

² Let me say in passing that he is also less critical than the other members, of the original premises of historical materialism, i.e. the model of base-superstructure and the hierarchy of levels.

with an insight into the main discussions in historiography today on the nature of historical writing.

In this chapter I would like to look at and analyse his way of writing history. In order to draw his general attitudes as a historian and a political and social commentator I will give a presentation of his works on the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, on historiography and on current socio-political problems of the world. Before this presentation with introductory explanations about most of his works –in the second part-and the critical assessment of trilogy –in the third part-, I would like to give brief biographical information, as he calls ‘social biography’, of Hobsbawm having some effects, unsurprisingly, on his writing of history. The sources which I make use of for his biography are Harvey J. Kaye’s *British Marxist Historians* (1984), Asım Karaömerlioğlu’s review (“Yaşanılanı Yazmak: Hobsbawm’ın Yüzyılı”, *Birikim*, 1998) on Hobsbawm’s *The Age of Extremes*, Tim Robbins’ article on Hobsbawm, “The Lion of the Left” (*The Observer*, January 21, 2001), and Daniel Snowman’s interview with him (*History Today*, January, 1999).

I

Eric John Ernst Hobsbawm was born in July 9, 1917 in Alexandria in Egypt. His mother was the daughter of an Austrian family and his father was member of a Russian family of Jewish origin who had migrated to Britain. They encountered each other in Alexandria and married there.³ His family, when he was two years old, returned to Vienna. They went to Berlin when Hobsbawm was twelve. In the years

³ Hobsbawm himself expressed in the “Overture” of the last book of his trilogy on the nineteenth century (*The Age of Empire*, pp.1-2) the place of such an encounter in his ‘social biography’ which brought his mother and father together in this city of the British Empire and was actually impossible to realise unless the conditions of empire were emerged, and explained the meaning of it in terms of social history.

of his studentship in Berlin when Hitler began to gain political power, he felt close to socialism. He participated in the Communist Party there when he was fourteen. They lived Berlin until Hitler came to power.

His parents both died during the Depression and their uncle took in him and his sister. In 1933 they moved to and then settled in England where he lived most of his life. It was due to the fear of growing danger of Nazism that actually seemed to be more for a person who was of Jewish origin. He states that the combinations of three important factors -e.g. fascism, The Great Depression and the October Revolution gave way for him to consider himself a 'Marxist' even as a schoolboy.

He attended St. Marylebone Grammar School in London and went on to King's College in Cambridge University to study history. He found himself among other Marxist students and became an active member of the Communist Party. He began his historical works in the Group of Historians in the English Communist Party. His first research was, surprisingly, on agrarian problems in French North Africa. He gained a research studentship to study that area. His studies were interrupted by the war and afterwards returned to Cambridge to complete his degree. In the army where he confronted an unexpected profile –for him- of the working classes with mundane and right-wing aspirations, his interests gravitated towards English economic history.

The Historians' Group gained somewhat regular organisation in the post-war period and Hobsbawm always played an important role in the group. In the crisis which burst out by the invasion of Hungary by the USSR, some members like Hill, Hilton and Thompson left both the group and the party but Hobsbawm did not. He stayed in

the party as a long-time member and continued to contribute to the transformation of British Communist Party called as 'Democratic Left' today staying in the party since he believed in the necessity of a strongly organised party. After 1956 he continued his studies in the group of *History Workshop*, which replaced the former group and *Past and Present* whose the first issue was published in 1952 and of which Hobsbawm was one of the founding fathers.

The journal *Past and Present* is considered to be one of the peaks of studies of social history and "...has, in Britain, a close association with the emergence of new approaches to social history."⁴ It was founded by British Marxist historians but not controlled by the party, and therefore it "...soon became a forum for discussions between Marxist and leading non-Marxist historians such as Lawrence Stone, T.S Ashton, John Elliot, and Geoffrey Elton"⁵ in order to write 'social history of ordinary people'. The historians coming together around such a common base refused both the reduction of history into natural sciences and social sciences, and at the same time the view emphasising that history was not inclined to generalisations.

In 1959 he became a Reader in Birkbeck College in London University in which he entered as a staff member in 1947. In his forties he was already a noted essayist and a very influential figure on the left, and began to produce important books – *Primitive Rebels* (1959), *The Age of Revolution* (1962), *Labouring Men* (1964). However, it was not until the late 1970s that he became well known to a general reader as a social and political analyst. In the 1980s as one of the most prolific analysts of the Left his insights into events and trends emerged as "major points of departure for debate and

⁴G. Iggers, *New Directions in European Historiography*, 1984, p. 171.

⁵ G.Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century*, 1997, p. 85.

discussion” as in the case of his “The Forward March of Labour Halted?” (1978) in which he questioned “one of the oldest tenets of socialist faith –the linear progression of the worker’s movement”⁶ in the occasion of the Communist Party’s annual Marx memorial lecture. He, from a historical perspective, uses the framework of base-superstructure to explain the Labour’s decline and explains it in terms of structural shifts in post-war capitalism.⁷

The winds of the Cold War prevented him from being a professor for a long time. He gained the title of the ‘Professor of Economic and Social History’ in 1970. He made several travels to Europe, to the Mediterranean and Latin America. He gave a course as an invited professor in the department of Economy in Stanford University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology in USA. He taught until his retirement at Birkbeck College in 1982 and since then he has been teaching at New School for Social Research in New York. He seems to be a very international academic portrait in the sense that he is always in contact with different academic fields and personalities. He has made several trips to Mediterranean countries during the 1950s and to South America during the 1960s for his peasant studies which are a mark of the international colour of his academic personality.

II

When we look at his works one of the most characteristic features of Hobsbawm, noticed even at the first sight, is the wide array of subjects and different geographical interests as mentioned at the beginning. He has been interested in different eras. He can draw upon so wide variety of sources from statistical evidence to letters as an

⁶ Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain*, 1997, respectively pp. 254-253.

⁷ *ibid.* pp. 253-254.

indicator of his wide-ranging interests in his studies. Accordingly once primarily an economic historian he has found himself increasingly drawn towards broader cultural issues in his later works like *The Invention of Tradition* but again in the framework of Marxist historical writing –in terms of base-superstructure model and class struggle analysis. Beyond his extensive historical studies he has “...written articles and reviews on contemporary politics and society, historiography and social theory, and art and cultural criticism”⁸ which I have to leave unmentioned here for the sake of analysis of his mentioned works.

To begin with his books, it can be said that before his trilogy (*The Age of Revolution*, *The Age of Capital*, *The Age of Empire*) and his remarkable *Age of Extremes* embracing the last two centuries of the modern -capitalist- history “...were fully conceived, Eric Hobsbawm was probably best known as a labour historian.”⁹ Besides his first book, *Labour’s Turning Point, 1880-1900* (1948), there are two major books through which “...easy access can be gained to his vast output on labour history...”¹⁰: *Worlds of Labour* (1963) and *Labouring Men* (1964) They are about new trade unionism of 1889-1914, or the late nineteenth-century revival of socialism in Britain. The former consists of articles which are “the product of several years’ interest in working-class history and affairs.” (p. vii)

Uncommon people (1990), his more recent work on labour history is a collection of essays written between the early 1950s and the middle 1990s, some of which have previously appeared in earlier books, *Labouring Men*, *Revolutionaries* and *Worlds*

⁸ Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians: An Introductory Analysis*, 1984, 1984, p. 132.

⁹ G. Therborn, ‘The Autobiography of the Twentieth Century’, *New Left Review*, no.214, 1995, p. 82.

¹⁰ *ibid.* p. 82.

of *Labour* and continue the lines of enquiry pursued in his first books published at the end of the 1950s *Primitive Rebels* and the *Jazz Scene*. They, accordingly, are about the working class, traditional peasantry, and Jazz. More recent essays are related to different subjects from the May Day Holiday to the Vietnam War, from the Mafia to the cultural consequences of Christopher Colombus.

He states that he expects his book has helped to rescue “the sort of people whose names are usually unknown” from the oblivion or from “what E. P. Thompson called, in his memorable phrase, ‘the enormous condescension of posterity’”. However, he emphasises that his point is “rather that, *collectively*, if not as individuals, such men and women are major historical actors” since “what they do and think makes a difference” (p. vii) in the course of history. That is why he has called the book, *Uncommon People*, a book about ordinary people traditionally known as ‘common people’. Even though he may well be called a labour historian, he showed an interest in peasant studies (in fact, as a trace of his first academic studies) “...as is shown by his interest in Italian and Spanish *Primitive Rebels* (1959)”¹¹ in which he made use of the letters of social bandits as documents in order to present them ‘in their voices’ and in society’s outsiders as in *Bandits* (1969) as a more advanced form of the former book in which he analyses the historical emergence of ‘social banditry’ especially in peasant societies in relation with the theme of the “...conflict between the traditional cultural values of the lower classes and the emerging capitalist economy and bureaucratic state”¹².

¹¹ G. Therborn, ‘The Autobiography of the Twentieth Century’, p. 83.

¹² G. Iggers, *Historiography*, p. 87.

The theme of his *Primitive Rebels* and his and Rude's *Captain Swing* is the conflict between the traditional cultural values of the lower classes and the emerging capitalist economy and bureaucratic state. In *Primitive Rebels*, Hobsbawm examines what he terms 'archaic' forms of social movements, the ones "...of precapitalist groups in confrontation with expanding capitalism."¹³ He saw them as 'primitive' and 'archaic' since they were "...social movements of prepolitical people who have not yet found, or [have] only began to find, a specific language in which to express their aspiration about the world."¹⁴ In *Bandits* he appreciates primitive rebellions as social banditry 'distinguished from ordinary rural crimes'. This thesis of the social character of banditry is criticised in the sense that "...all banditry should be viewed as expressions of 'social protest or rebellion'" and it is "...wrong to differentiate social bandits from criminal bandits"¹⁵ as Hobsbawm does.

In *Captain Swing: A Social History of the Great English Agricultural Uprising of 1830* (1969), which he has written with George Rude, they explain that before the 1830s, the agricultural workers were no longer peasants, but the social order in which they lived was still traditional and "in many respects resistant to the full logic of the market". Giving the task of the book is "...of reconstructing the mental world of an anonymous and undocumented body of people in order to understand their movements..." (p. 12), they "...describe and analyse an entire epoch of the English farm-labourers history, that of the rise and fall of their improvised, archaic, spontaneous movements of resistance to the full triumph of rural capitalism..." (pp. 18 and 19) by offering new questions about the events of 1830.

¹³ H.Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians*, p. 147.

¹⁴ *ibid.* p. 148.

¹⁵ *ibid.* p.149.

There are the books of synthesis making use of a great deal knowledge of historical facts depending on the works of great many writers of history and the theoretical evaluation of them in order to show the interdependence of social phenomena and what kind of interdependence it was. Among those works like his trilogy we may also account the more specialised *Industry and Empire. An Economic History of Britain since 1750* (1968). Hobsbawm, here, concentrates on the emergence and the rise of Britain as a leading figure of industrial power and the reasons of this relative superiority, and its regression from this status and “..treats the development of British industrial capitalism in a world-historical context.”¹⁶

Revolutionaries: Contemporary Essays (1973) is a collection of essays in which the theme of revolution is pursued with related to different aspects of revolutionary ideas of modern era such as anarchism, communism, Marx and Lenin, guerrilla warfare. In *Echoes of the Marseillaise: two centuries look back on the French Revolution* (1990) he questions the importance and the role of the French Revolution in the past and in the present. For him the nineteenth century “...studied, copied, compared itself to, or tried to avoid, bypass, repeat, or go beyond the French Revolution.” Whereas Revisionists “...tend to suggest that the Revolution really did not make all that much of a difference in French history, and that it certainly was not a change for the better” (p. xi), he claims that “...the Revolution had dramatically increased French economic growth and created a massive and contended body of peasant proprietors” (p. xii) He defends the centrality of the Revolution on a global basis since it gave peoples, for him, the sense that history could be changed by their action.

¹⁶ H. Kaye, *British Marxist Historians*, p. 157.

The Invention of Tradition (1983) which he edited with Terence Ranger and *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780* (1990) can be taken as a sign of cultural interest in his historical writing. They seem to be products of interdisciplinary studies more than others in which he analyses the historical advancement of 'nationalism' and its today as an ideology in the latter and how it makes use of cultural elements through history to justify the eternity of nation-state in the former.

The Invention of Tradition is a collection of articles on the construction of symbolic and ceremonial traditions over the last couple of centuries, particularly by the British and emphasises that many practices which are considered traditional are in fact quite recent inventions, often deliberately constructed to serve particular ideological ends. The very expression 'invention of tradition' is somewhat redundant, since all traditions, as products of human behaviour and human imagination rather than the result of natural forces, are invented in one way or another. Hobsbawm being aware of this concedes in his concluding essay of the book that they also very often gave expression to very real feelings, rather than just demonstrating some sort of arbitrary invention or manipulation.

Hobsbawm's analysis of nationalism can be taken as 'structuralist' in a broader term besides his Marxist evaluations. Structuralists tend to see nationalism as an epiphenomenon of deeper social mechanism -- such as modern industry (Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism*) or, as in the case of Hobsbawm, as capitalism at a particular stage of its development. Hobsbawm seeks to explain nationalism as a deliberate ploy by the capitalist class to sow 'false consciousness' in order to divert

the proletariat from the class struggle, tending generally not to recognise the importance of primordialism.

As a good example of the variety of his interests adding to his studies as a cultural historian, it can be reminded that he has also been a serious jazz critic. In his book, *The Jazz Scene* originally published in 1959 along with his *Primitive Rebels*, he defines the 'distinctive and compelling attributes' of jazz in terms of the view that it is "...socially produced and in international perspective".¹⁷ Now let us turn to the deeper analysis of how he writes on the nineteenth century with his trilogy.

III

His trilogy (*The Age of Revolution*, *The Age of Capital*, *The Age of Empire*) on the nineteenth century and *Age of Extremes* on the twentieth century can be considered to be the best examples of his attempts for writing 'total history' as a 'common conception' linking these three and what came after them to each other even though he says that he did not plan to write a series at the beginning¹⁸. He states what he aimed to do in general with his trilogy in the last one of the series, *The Age of Empire*, with an expression informing us also what he thinks about the nature and the function of history. He tries to:

"...understand and explain the nineteenth century and its place in history, to understand a world in the process of revolutionary transformation, to trace the roots of our present back into the soil of the past and perhaps above all, to see the past as a coherent whole rather than (as historical specialization so often forces us to see it) as an assembly of separate topics..."¹⁹.

¹⁷ R. Story, The Book Review: *The Jazz Scene*, *The Historian*, no. 56, 1994, p. 564.

¹⁸ D. Snowman, Interview with Hobsbawm, *History Today*, January, 1999.

¹⁹ E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire*, 1987, in the first page of the "Preface".

He traces the “...transformation of capitalism in the historically specific forms of bourgeois society in its liberal version”²⁰ throughout the trilogy. The first volume is structured around the concept of the dual revolution; British on the economic and French on the political side. This revolution is depicted as the one that creates, strengthens and also spreads the most characteristic features of modern society to the rest of the world. The second volume, *The Age of Capital*, introduces the confident conquest of the globe by the bourgeois liberal capitalism led by this dual revolution. *The Age of Empire*, the third volume, depicts an era in which the inner contradictions of this progress came into the light, “...when massive organized movements of the class of wage-workers created by, and characteristic of, industrial capitalism suddenly emerged and demanded the overthrow of capitalism.”²¹

Age of Revolution

The main theme of the first book of the trilogy is the transformation of the world between 1789 and 1848 defined by the concept around which it is structured i.e. the ‘Dual Revolution’; the Political French and the Industrial British Revolution. The history of the Revolutions cannot be confined to the history of these two countries since these revolutions must be seen “as the twin crater of a rather larger regional volcano” (p. 2) which centred in North-western world but affected most parts of the world in time. Hobsbawm concentrates on the far-reaching societal impact of these revolutions while depicting the agrarian/feudal world of 1780s and the preconditions that fostered the revolutions.

²⁰ *ibid*, p. 8-9.

²¹ E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire*, p. 10.

Hobsbawm argues that whereas the Industrial Revolution fundamentally altered the conditions of labour, giving rise to a new social order, the French Revolution exposed the vulnerability of the ancient regime and provided the paradigmatic shift supporting the rise of the middle class. For him, the publication of the *Communist Manifesto* marked the beginning of a worldwide social critique and chain reaction, testifying to the pervasive influence of the dual revolution in Britain and France. He believes the specific role of the transformation that was created through the Revolutions in shaping the world of the nineteenth century.

He analyses it in two distinct parts: the reasons and features of the transformation in the first part called as 'Developments' and its consequences in the second part called as 'Results'. For him all other distinctive developments of the century were the results of or related to the Dual Revolution. He firstly presents the general conditions in which it came into being and what was different from or similar to the world of today. He mentions the 'agrarian problem' in that "...the world of 1789 was overwhelmingly rural" (p. 11) and "the provincial town still belonged essentially to the economy and society of the countryside." (p. 12) However, for him the eighteenth century was not "...one of agricultural stagnation. On the contrary, a long era of demographic expansion, of growing urbanization, trade and manufacture, encouraged agricultural improvement and indeed required it." (p. 18)

In the second chapter he speaks of the leading role of Britain in the process of growing industrialisation in the nineteenth century and its reasons in order to understand the origins of the 'Industrial Revolution'. He states that "...Britain possessed an industry admirably suited to pioneering industrial revolution under

capitalist conditions, and an economic conjuncture which allowed it to: the cotton industry, and colonial expansion”(p. 33) by means of mechanisation which “...greatly increased the productivity...of its labour.” (p. 40) The origins of this position are found in the fact that in Britain the resistance to capitalisation deactivated towards the end of the seventeenth century²². This special position had given way to her leading role in the Industrial Revolution and determined her hegemony over the other parts of the world in economic and later in political sense.

When he comes to the French Revolution he states that if “...the economy of the nineteenth century world was formed mainly under the influence of the British Industrial Revolution, its politics and ideology were formed mainly by the French.” (p. 53) The determinative role of the revolution on the political scene was due to the fact that “... the conflict between the official framework and the vested interests of the old regime and the rising new social forces was more acute in France than elsewhere.” (p. 55) It created a sense of the growing opposition between the old regime and the new social forces, i.e. third estate including the middle and working classes.

For him it was France which brought about in this age to be a democratic and mass revolution since it signalled more than elsewhere the emergence of the new powers with the slogan of ‘equal rights’ firstly against the ancient regime by middle classes and then against what became dominant -bourgeoisie- by working classes. He mentions the centrality of the French Revolution for history in that it “...demonstrated the power of the common people in a manner which no subsequent government has ever allowed itself to forget” as he also stresses in his later book,

²² E. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire*, 1969, p.4.

Echoes of Marseillaise. The conflict between the old and new regimes created different groups having a claim on the political arena informing the intensity of later social movements. The results of this multidimensional Revolution began to show themselves in a more clear way in the 1830s with the end of the Restoration Period. 1830 marked "...the emergence of the working-class as an independent and self-conscious force in politics in England and France, and of nationalist movements in a great many European countries..." (p. 111)

He sees economic and social reasons behind this great transformation. It seems to him that political changes are somewhat the results. For him the states cannot hold up the course of history, in clash with the view which emphasises the importance of states in the historical flow as in the case of Charles Tilly, who evaluates the European revolutions in the last five centuries with relation to the changes in the structures of the states and the relationships between the states and he believes in the role of states in the societal change.

Many developments in this century can be evaluated as the results of this great transformation: "Nationalism, like so many other characteristics of the modern world, is the child of the dual revolution." (p. 145) It is why he believes that the "...basic characteristic of the modern nation and everything connected with it is its modernity."²³ Mass and structured social movements began to appear, the most important one which reflected the severity of the conflicts between the old and the new marks the end of the period: "The revolutions of 1848 made it clear that the

²³ E. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*, 1990, p. 14.

middle classes, liberalism, political democracy, nationalism, even the working classes, were henceforth permanent features of the political landscape.”²⁴

To come to the results of this transformation it signals that the world enters into the industrial era. This era was characterised with the accelerating rate of economic and social change: the end of aristocratic society and the disruption of traditional agrarian society in economic terms, and the emergence of the middle class with the slogan of “open careers to talents” and therefore the so-called equalisation of the rights in that sense and the emergence of the clash between the two in the social and political arena. But also the third one: the workers against the growing bourgeoisie. The economic and -to complement it- political revolution with legal regulations also put an end to the world ruled by religion before and entailed the process of secularisation. Through this development science, like many other developments, began to advance in many terms.

He examines the developments in science, ideas, and the arts in relation to the dual revolution he refers to as ‘class structured’.²⁵ Throughout the book he stresses that this two-fold transformation marked the beginning of the great triumph of human society in both economic and political sense. However, he traces this transformation not only as a reflection of the triumph of the new bourgeois society in the nineteenth century, but as a process of the emergence of the new powers which tend to prevent this capitalistic spread in the following periods.

²⁴ E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital*, 1975, p. 40.

²⁵ Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians*, p. 161.

The Age of Capital

In this volume he analyses the period which witnessed the triumph of private enterprise and its exponents. He defines the period as the extension of capitalism from Europe to the entire world states that "...the global triumph of capitalism is the major theme of history in the decades after 1848." (p. 13) The revolutions of 1848 marked the triumph of 'bourgeois society' not both in the economic and political sense but the weight of the Industrial Revolution was more than the political one in this period. For him bourgeoisie and its opposites gave this century its real colour.

He again analyses the period in two parts as being 'developments' and 'results'. One of the most important developments was a great economic boom which took place after the revolution. It was "...a world of continuous and accelerating material and moral progress." This notion -progress- was the one which defined the period. Economically it referred to the 'population rise' causing mass production and as a result the emergence of domestic consumer market. "In this era industrial capitalism became a genuine world economy and the globe was therefore transformed ...into a constant operational reality. History from now on became a world history." (p. 63)

He analyses the advancement of democratisation and the rise of nationalism which came into arena in the 'Age of Revolution'. Growing social movements enforced for the states to answer the demands of 'people'. The emergence and the rise of nationalism is one of the subjects he traces throughout the trilogy, actually in his last book too. He speaks of the stages of nationalism. For instance the notion of the revolutionary 'nation' cannot be read "anything like the later nationalist programme

of establishing nation-states”²⁶ In this period it was still compatible with bourgeois society differing from what came with the rise of fascism in the nineteenth century.

He claims that the rise of nationalism was defined by the revolutions of 1848. It was the ‘springtime of peoples’ (p. 21) in that it gave them their voice as features of the political landscape. It and its results can be considered as the reflections of the crystallisation of the demands of the different groups. Another term comes as a consequence of this triumph: ‘losers and winners’ supported by the notion of ‘only the survival of the fittest’. It was seen through the European (Westernisation) and American domination over the other parts of the world which reduced the latter ones to the colonial status. The victors and the victims are not only outside of the borders of the countries, also inside as in the case of the rise of bourgeoisie against the poor working classes. Urbanisation and industrial work spread as symbols emphasising the different life styles of middle class and working class.

After the great economic boom, which signified the rise of a bourgeois way of life, a new phase was entered with the coming economic stagnation defined by a prolonged depression. The new period was seen as one of international competition between ‘rival’ economies with the confused tension of this economic depression.

Age of Empire

Hobsbawm, in this book, depicts the period between the years 1875 and 1914 as the one in which the inner contradictions of the progress of bourgeois society became more visible. This era begun with the Great Depression of the 1870s which “...opened an era of rural unrest and peasant revolution” (223) and ended with the

²⁶ E. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*, p. 20.

first World War in 1914. In this era of Western imperialism technology, nationalism, imperialism, and revolution prevailed which made it one of opportunity as well as one of hardship. In this book there are no distinct parts for developments and results but chronologically ordered themes more unitary in analytical terms. In the 'Overture', he states that the book depicts a specific period in its world but stresses the connection and continuity between the different periods. For this reason he traces some themes he analysed in the previous books such as nationalisation, democratisation and globalisation and their new faces. Thus Hobsbawm, here, concentrates on how culture, politics, and economics are intrinsically linked more than he did in the previous two.

The world of the 1880s is depicted in the pages from 13 to 16: It was genuinely global and more densely populated. The division between the advanced and backward countries became severe and humanity had begun to be divided by 'race' (pp. 31-32) seeming to be as a result of the 'new colonialism'. In this period after "...a generation of unparalleled expansion, the world economy was in crisis." (p. 33) The developed world was no more an aggregate of 'national economies' because "...industrialization and the Depression turned them into a group of rival economies, in which the gains of one seemed to threaten to the position of others." (p. 42)

He speaks of then 'the new colonialism' as "...a by-product of an era of economic-political rivalry between competing national economies, intensified by protectionism." (p. 76) The new colonialism created a new cultural phenomenon, which made the colonialisised world also culturally as well as economically dependent: 'westernisation'. He evaluates the new imperialism as one of the possible

ways out of the business troubles after the 1870s besides monopoly and scientific management. Other final results of the Great Depression were 'great social agitation' and 'modern labour movements' seemed to be more structured and mass ones with the ideal of a new society. With the electoral systems the growing voices of 'people' created some pressure on governments giving way to the politics of Democracy. It also witnessed the rise of nationalism with a different phase with two important differences the previous periods: There was "...a growing tendency to assume that 'national self -determination' could not be satisfied by any form of autonomy less than full state independence" and there was "...a novel tendency to define a nation in terms of ethnicity and especially in terms of language." (p. 144) Both of them referred to the rivalry and the growing opposition between the states representing their nations.

This era was of collapse and transition in many terms and it ended with a date, which proved it in a concrete way. For him 1914 is one of the most undeniable 'natural breaks' in history in that it marked "...the end of the world made by and for the bourgeoisie." (p. 6) The era witnessed "...the dissolution of the hopes and values to which the nineteenth century aspired." (p. 340). The new century was, at the beginning, to experience uncertainty and a sense of loss.

Chapter Five

Writing as a 'Participant Observer'

*"...when one writes...about one's own time, inevitably the personal experience of these times shape the way we see them, and even the way we assess the evidence to which all of us, irrespective of our views, must appeal and submit."*¹ E. Hobsbawm

Before beginning to evaluate Hobsbawm's historical and socio-political works on the twentieth century, let me explain that I find, in fact, the analogy I have made between a social anthropologist and a historian or a social analyst with the term 'participant observer'² not much convenient, if the term is used in the way the social anthropologists use it. They use the term generally in the direction from outwards to inwards i. e. social anthropologists observe a community being a stranger but participating into the community's life for a while as an 'open-eyed traveller'. On the contrary the situation of historians, writing on their own life-time (and an analyst writing the social and political affairs of his or her world) cannot be defined in the same way since historians try to define a social arena in which they are very much involved –participated- but trying to observe it as an 'open-eyed resident'. I would like to turn, now, two of Hobsbawm's works on the twentieth century in order to provide a basis to evaluate later how much 'open-eyed' he is in his analyses.

Age of Extremes

For Hobsbawm unlike the nineteenth century, the 'Short Twentieth Century' was/is

¹E. Hobsbawm, *On History*, 1998 (1997), p. 304.

² The term was used by Hobsbawm in *Age of Extremes* (p. x) and his use of it inspired me.

no longer Euro-centric because it "... had brought the decline and fall of Europe, still the unquestioned centre of power, wealth, intellect... when the century began." (p. 14) The century begins with the First World War marking the break-down of the (western) civilisation of the 'long nineteenth century', and ends with the collapse of the USSR following the decades of global crisis which made the people of the century confront some dramatic consequences of it in his view. He tries to analyse the reasons and the results of this breakdown in relation and in comparison with the previous century. *Age of Extremes* is linked to the first three books depicting the nineteenth century in the sense that it describes the twentieth century around the themes and conclusions coming from them.

What makes the twentieth century as one of *extremes* is 'the paradox of the condition', as he calls. While the material development of the twentieth century is much more than one of the nineteenth century, this development is matched with incredible catastrophes at the same time. He analyses this century -and this paradoxical condition- in three different parts defined by three distinct terms for his evaluation: "An Age of Catastrophe from 1914 to the aftermath of the Second World War was followed by some twenty-five of thirty years of extraordinary economic growth and social transformation... In retrospect it can be seen as a sort of Golden Age, and was so seen almost immediately it had come to an end in the early 1970s. The last part of the century was a new era of decomposition, uncertainty and crisis..." (p. 6) which he defines as 'Landslide'. This thematic understanding of the century is related to his evolution of capitalism as 'undulating'.³

³ He makes use, here, of the theory of 'long waves' of Russian economist, Kondratieff, who "discerned a pattern of economic development since the late eighteenth century through a series of 'long waves' of from fifty to sixty years" (p. 87) and he mentions the utility of this theory to understand the character of capitalism in *The New Century* (see p. 3) and many times *On History* (see for instance pp. 37, 229) too.

His periodisation for the 'beginning' and the 'end' of the century needs evaluation. For him 1914 defines the *Age of Catastrophe* which is an age of 'total war': "There is no understanding the Short Twentieth Century without war... Its history and, more specifically, the history of its initial age of breakdown and catastrophe, must begin with that of the thirty-one years' world war." (p. 22) 'Mass war' required mass production, which also required organisation and management defining the general framework of the century.

Although he takes the date of 1914 as a point of departure, Hobsbawm makes a special emphasis on the decisive role of the October Revolution in the history of the twentieth century. As he restates in his *On History*, it is a 'towering phenomenon' not just in Russian country but also in the history of the twentieth century.⁴ He thinks that the Revolution has the central role in that it determines the way the history flows as the creator of the ideological polarisation of capitalism and socialism defining the nature of the political, social and cultural arena of this century. 1989, as a date which ended the process of the October Revolution with the fail of the model of the country where the process began, is a very crucial turning point according to him. It marked the end of the ideological polarisation between the two camps, and after that the international balance based on this polarisation has begun to be shaken.

Turning to the beginning of the century it was marked with an economic abyss and fall of liberalism with the rise of fascism as a result. This made the two opposite fronts –capitalism vs. socialism- come against the 'common enemy': "It is one of the ironies of this strange century that the almost lasting results of the October

⁴E. Hobsbawm, *On History*, p. 332.

revolution, whose object was the most global overthrow of capitalism, was to save antagonist, both in war and in peace.” (p. 7) In the post-war period the rivalry between the two camps called the ‘Cold War’ overshadowed most the conflicts except one between the great camps that frozen the international situation after the Second World War and “... in doing so had stabilized what was an essentially unfixed and provisional state of affairs” (p. 12) making an indispensable contribution of the expansion of capitalism on a global scale.

The post-war period from 1945 to 1970s is not without problems as far as international stability (remember civil but actually international wars with great losses like Korean and Vietnam wars)⁵ and national policies (the challenges towards capitalism even in its own bastion⁶ in terms social and economic distribution) are concerned. Albeit these are signs of the beginning of the break-down of the Enlightenment values and of what capitalism as a socio-political system, Hobsbawm’s definition of Golden Age is still much relevant to define the age, and convenient in terms of great economic advancement of capitalism in that period.

However the 1970s presents a landscape of a global economic crisis with a rapidly rising inflation and an increasing rate of unemployment since capital became international. This atmosphere of global economic crisis and consequently of social and political uncertainty leads to, for him, the rise of ideologies i.e. fundamentalist and nationalist movements as a reaction to this sense of loss, he finds a sign of new forms of ‘barbarism’. On the one hand the people of this century faced with a

⁵ Asım Karaömerlioğlu, “Yasanılanı Yazmak: Hobsbawm’ın Yüzyılı”, Birikim, no: 98, 1997, p. 88.

⁶ *ibid.* p. 88. He mentions the book of Michael Harrington, *The Other America*, to speak of the other face of America, the richest country of the world, in the 1960s challenging with severe poverty.

“...constantly advancing technology, based on triumphs of natural science... Perhaps most dramatic practical consequence of these was a revolution in transport and communications which virtually annihilated time and distance.” (p. 12) On the other hand this transformation of the ‘quantitative material growth’ turned into the ‘qualitative upheavals of life’. That stems, for him, from the fact that the end of the Cold War “...removed the props which held up the international structure and... the structures of the world’s domestic political systems. And what was left was a world in disarray and partial collapse, because there was nothing to replace them.” (p. 255)

At the last quarter of the century, the world has been living in a ‘historic crisis’ according to Hobsbawm in economic and socio-political terms. He admits the importance of economic and technological advances after the post-war period leading ‘the most dramatic, rapid and profound revolution in human affairs of which history has record.’ (p. 286) However he points to the other side of the coin many times and discusses heavily on its crisis after 1970s and the negative consequences of the ‘economic process of the development of capitalism’ especially seen after the end of the Cold War with the collapse of the Soviet Union partly due to his socialist tension. He states (p. 584-5):

The forces generated by the techno-scientific economy are now great enough to destroy the environment, that is to say, the material conditions of human life. The structures of human societies themselves, including even some of the social foundations of the capitalist economy, are on the point of being destroyed by the erosion of what we have inherited from the human past. Our world risks both explosion and implosion.

And concludes:

It must change... If we try to build the third millennium on that basis, we shall fail. And the price of failure, that is to say, the alternative to a changed society, is darkness.

The New Century

In *The New Century* (2000), in conversation with Antonio Polio, Hobsbawm takes into account the state of world today with the issues ranging from globalisation to the present and future of the Left. He questions 'where we are and where we are heading' and makes some projections on the new century in the light of the marks of the previous one, reiterating much of themes he mentions in *Age of Extremes* such as global expansion of capitalism and its negative consequences on international basis. The book is a good indicator of his interests about current problems of the world. He aims, here, "...to discuss problems as they appear today, and identify some probabilities" (p. 2) since he has the belief that history "...can tell us how various elements coming together within a society serve to create an historical dynamic, or conversely, fail to cause it." (p. 6) Therefore he also believes that history can give us some clues about the general tendencies of the future world.

In the *Introduction*, he discusses that the twentieth century left two crucial legacies to the new one: Economic stagnation and crisis all over the world and the collapse of Soviet Union. For him since 1973 the world economy has entered a new phase and subsequent economic crisis of 1997-98 followed it. Besides these heavy crisis of world economy and in related with it the collapse of the Soviet Union had some effects which proved to be serious and lasting. He gives importance to the collapse of the Union: "In terms of international politics and of ideologies, it is quite clear that the demise of the communist regimes in the East has constituted a real historical break." (p. 4) That is because the relative stability of the world prevailing throughout the 'Cold War'⁷ has begun to be challenged with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

⁷ Hobsbawm reiterated the view that the Cold War stabilised international situation, stated previously in detail in *Age of Extremes*, see the chapter 'Cold War', p. 252.

The answer to the question of “where does this belief in history come from, this ambition to be able to read the future predicted from the past?”, gives the general lines of historical writing of Hobsbawm: “Marx gave me the awareness that it is an instrument without which we cannot understand what is happening in the world. I was persuaded by his idea that history can be seen and analyzed as a whole and it ...has structure and a pattern, which are human society’s story of evolution over a long period of time.” (pp. 4-5) For him since the past has a dynamic structure linking present and future, it is ‘intelligible’ and open to be analysed. History, in that sense, can present the fundamental aspects of the society and we can predict, through the analysis of the past, in which borders present and future develop.

In the chapter of *War and Peace*, he stresses the general nature of war and peace has changed at the end of the twentieth century in the sense that “...the line that distinguishes internal conflicts from international conflicts has disappeared or is tending to disappear.” (p. 9) He also attracts our attention to the fact that since the Cold War “flooded the world with its capacity for producing arms...” “...we have a return to private enterprise in war.” (p. 12) He gives another reason for this: Private entities are now able to have extraordinary wealth partly due to the growth of illegal businesses. The emergence and rise of extraordinarily powerful private entities is related to the decline of state in the most places of the world even in the ones seeming most stabilised ones in many terms i.e. Western countries. This condition causes the increase of the destabilising forces against the international balance.

It also increases “the need for the ‘permanent’ and the ‘fundamental’ ...in an era of change and constant insecurity.” (p. 28) Hobsbawm evaluates the current emergence

of national conflicts and civil states as "...a response to a double collapse: the collapse of political order as represented by functioning states...and the crumbling of the old frameworks of social relations over a large part of the world"⁸. For him this kind of conflicts and wars refer to the rise of 'barbarism' as he terms. He gives two reasons for the rise of barbarism. The first one is the "disruption and breakdown of the systems of rules and moral behaviour by which all societies regulate the relations among their members." The second is "...the reversal of what we may call the project of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, namely the establishment of a universal system of such rules and standards of moral behaviour."⁹

He takes twentieth century as one of 'extremes' in which there are many paradoxical situations –as a recurring theme from his *Age of Extremes*. For instance, on the one hand, "...for the first time, production can be geared to the demands of the mass of the population" (p. 85), but on the other hand, there is increasing scarcity in many terms in most of the areas of the world. Whereas in the Western world many people enjoy civil rights –but not all of them to be sure-, the so-called Third world has experienced and continues to experience economic and political instability with continuous civil wars directly or indirectly enforced by one of Western countries.

The West used to have a model of 'progress', which it claims to be universal and, to use Foucault's terms, exercise power for the 'other' to apply this model via the discourse of the Enlightenment. This model with its serious outcomes upon the 'other world' has been criticised severely or called into question in political and academic terms. The critiques directed towards it are of course mentioned and acknowledged

⁸ E. Hobsbawm, "Barbarism: A User's Guide" in *On History*, p. 348.

⁹ *ibid*, p. 335.

to be true in part by Hobsbawm many times but he does not come to the conclusion that we must supplant all the values of the Enlightenment since we have not got an alternative to it to find a way out 'barbarism'. As Georg Iggers pointed out, like Hobsbawm did in the last lines of *Age of Extremes*:

"The history of this century has taught us a great deal about the ambiguities of Enlightenment conceptions of human rights and rationality... This should lead us, however, not to abandonment and repudiation of the Enlightenment heritage but instead to a critical reexamination of it... The alternative to an albeit chastened Enlightenment is barbarism."¹⁰

In *The Decline of the Western Empire*, he states that beforehand "state... acquired knowledge and power, enlarged its ambitions, and widened its range of responsibilities and areas of intervention. When this process reached its zenith in the middle of the Short Century, there was very little that the state did not control." (p. 32) However "...this tendency... certainly has lost its momentum since the 1960s." (p. 34) Whereas in Western countries where the socio-political system is much stabilised, the state has begun to weaken, in the other parts of the world it has been almost disappear. This creates "...the question of interaction between the world where the state exists and the world where it does not." (p. 37) Hobsbawm, by pointing such crux, declares that the idea of globalisation going hand in hand with the view that the world has begun to be stabilised and life to be standardised has some problems. For him we "...can have a globalized economy...but politically speaking, we have a world that remains in reality pluralist and divided into territorial states." (p. 43) Even though the Cold War stabilised large parts of the world, for the moment it has been replaced by complete uncertainty with the 'erosion of rules' as mentioned before.

¹⁰ G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century*, p. 147.

Accordingly he discusses the role of the United States as a power stabilising the world. He says that the USA believes in this task of controlling the state of world and of stabilising it but the world has become too large and complicated to be dominated by a single state in his opinion. In addition to the ideology that the USA exercises, i. e. "...libertarian individualism is not compatible ...with the requirements of international politics" (p. 50) since it is opposed to collective politics.

He provides some explanations of the role of America that gives us a clue to understand the reasons of the eleventh of September, 2001, better: "A superpower...can take certain measures to moderate conflicts and stabilize the international situation... but it cannot... determine what happens in the world." (p. 51) The "...show of force is not enough to govern the world" since "...the peoples of the weaker countries are no longer willing to submit to it." (p. 54) The West could not see the anger of the Third World to the Western countries, especially to the USA. The anger stems not only from the fact that the West is Christian and most of the Third World is not but rather from the fact that whereas the latter is poor and humiliated, the former is wealthy and powerful, as Amin Maalouf convincingly stated.¹¹

In *The Global Village*, Hobsbawm continues to speak of the qualities of the globalisation which he traces in the previous chapters. For him "... globalization means wider but not equal access" (p. 65) in the sense that the cake becomes larger, but the rich are taking exponentially growing share of it. In a socialist tension he claims that "human beings were not created for capitalism" but this "... does not

¹¹ A. Maalouf, *Ölümcül Kimlikler*, YKY, 2000, p. 56.

produce negative effects on production, but only on human beings.” (p. 87) This makes the nation-state indispensable since there must be some sort of public authority that can ensure the redistribution in society which globalisation, as a stage of capitalism, cannot ensure.

In *What is Left of the Left?*, he mentions the present intellectual crisis of the Left and finds “...its roots in its twin crisis of the Bolshevik/revolutionary and social-democratic branches” of it (p. 102). He observes a New Left since the sixties as a single issue movements, disintegrated and fragmented. However what he finds dangerous for the future of the Left is much related to the adoption of the ‘market logic’ since it destroys the sphere of public debate. He thinks that Blair fully accepted the ‘market-research logic’ of politics more than any other leader of the Left. With reference to Blair he says “...any form of left-wing politics...must say... we acknowledge that the market is an essential element in economics... but we cannot accept a free-market society.” (p. 106)

In accordance with this discussion he speaks of the depoliticisation of the young and gives very much importance to it as ‘one of the most noticeable and complicated problems of our times’ (p. 112). It can be evaluated as a reflection of the ‘presumption of the growing internal harmony of a society’ depended on ‘the economy of organised social consensus’ which some of thinkers like D. Bell in the late 1950s rested¹² on to claim the view that the advanced capitalist world reached to an international model of society which put an end to history and therefore there is no need for ideology i.e. political resistance for change. The validity of this view was

¹² E. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*, 1994, p. 286.

challenged after the 1960s and 1970s, but depoliticisation being its legacy via the Cold War, and an outcome of the collapse of Soviet Union as an additional –and very crucial- factor through such discourse is prevailing. It continues to be way to strengthen this model in the Western countries and a means for people not to challenge it in the ‘developing’ and ‘underdeveloped’ countries.

In the last chapter, *12 October 1999*, he thinks about the growing regional, geographic and social inequalities all over the world. He thinks that whereas in the West population is declining, the so-called in the Third World the condition is the opposite. He speaks of , as being one of the results, the need for importing cheap labour: “The current situation of strong demand on the one hand and restrictive measures on the other runs the risk of creating two societies: the first enjoying full citizenship and rights, and the second made up foreigners, displaying all the features of a permanent underclass.” (p. 145) Although he believes in the existence of the possibility of managing environment, he claims that the consequences of the population growth as a whole will be serious for the environment and ecosystem in the case of eliminating that possibility.

In *Conclusion: Hopes for the Future*, Hobsbawm repeats his views and arguments emerging throughout the book. He especially makes emphasis on the dramatic and widening of social and economic inequalities which he takes into consideration in the previous chapter. For him even though humankind will become economically better off as a whole, the implications of ‘widening social and economic inequalities’ give sufficient signs to worry about. There are inequalities not only within states but also among them. There is growing discrepancy between “..inferior majority of states and

self-satisfied minority of states.” (p. 165) The blindness of the ones enjoying the latter condition shows itself in the indifference to the other regions living in a state of poverty and instability. He thinks that “... in a world filled with such inequalities, to live in the favored regions is to be virtually cut off from the experience, let alone the reactions, of people outside those regions.” (p. 166)¹³ It might have used to be before the eleventh of September. With this shocking time, the USA in particular and the Western World in general confronted their ‘reaction’, which forced them to understand their ‘experience’. Hobsbawm, without knowing this shaky phenomenon, due to those reservations which he mentioned, concludes that he cannot look to the future with ‘great optimism’.

¹³ He mentions again the paradox of the twentieth century , here in the sense that The West is cut off the rest although “...the sum of amassed information is everywhere is accessible at the click of a mouse...” (p. 167)

Chapter Six

Writing On History: On History

*“...without a reconstruction... of what historians think about the past and the present situation, that is of their ideas of the world and man, including the mechanisms of the process of history, it is not possible to reflect adequately on how they study the past and on historical narratives as the results of such studies. The historian does not pose questions about past in an intellectual vacuum, without preliminary assumptions”*¹ J. Topolski.

In *On History* (1998) Hobsbawm takes into consideration the general and current discussions on historiography. The book brings together essays and talks in which he looks at history's connections to politics, society, and other disciplines and at trends within history itself. It is a collection of articles, which have spanned thirty year period of writing and are results of his thinking on the problems of historical writing. It is crucial to understand how he positions himself in the historical trends, how he interacts with and how he evaluates them, therefore how he views history and what his theory of history is alike.

It has important clues of Hobsbawm's understanding history and therefore makes sense for the thesis. *On History* in his own words consists of “... surveys and critical assessments of various historical trends and fashions and interventions in debates, for instance, about postmodernism and cliometrics”; about his own kind of history; “about the central problems which all serious historians ought to confront”;

¹ J. Topolski, “A Non-Postmodernist Analysis of Historical Narratives” in *Historiography between Modernism and Postmodernism*, edited by Topolski, 1994, pp. 63-4.

about the historical interpretation he has found most useful when doing so; about the ways in which the history he has written bears the marks of a man of his age, background, beliefs and life-experience. (p. vii) All of these points are very much interrelated with the main core of the thesis.

It consists of twenty one articles with different subjects but reflecting his view on history in general in each individual case.² Instead of presenting and analysing every article in a distinct way, rather I collect them in three main titles -and there are subtitles within them-, in order to provide the general premises of his historical writing. The main titles are as following: 1- History, historian and historical writing; 2- Marxist theory of history: premises and discussions; 3- Social history: premises and discussions.

I

History, historian and historical writing

The territory and the subject of history

Referring to the reduction of history to a pure analytical science and of historical method to a mechanical one, he states that history "... is and must be *sui generis*, and in this respect the historical reactionaries are correct" (p. 85) and therefore thinks that the historian must be interested in what societies have *not* in common and why. We have seen previously that postmodernism also, against generalisations, points to the necessity of the acceptance of the plurality of human societies in any sense and warns us about the universal claim about unilinear progress, and of history stressing

² The titles, the dates and the range of pages of the articles are given at the end of the chapter.

on 'difference'. Yet he needs a criterion for comparison among societies and finds it in 'their capacity to control outside nature' since in respect to that the differences leap to the eye.

Such a comparison necessitates, even though history must focus on the differences, the evolutionary *analysis* of them to capture as the fundamental question in history, which "...implies the discovery of a mechanism for both the differentiation of various human social groups and the transformation of one kind of society into another, or failure to do so." (p. 198) In that sense the important question is *why* as well as *what*. For him the historian's 'specialist concern' must be to understand the basic problem of the transformations of humanity.. Otherwise, for him, historians are engaged in 'trivialities or intellectual or other parlour-games'. He always questions how things fit together, even though it does not mean that history can "decide to leave out *any* aspect of human history *a priori*, though from time to time choosing to concentrate on some and to neglect others." (p. 144)

The use of history and the responsibilities of historian

Hobsbawm is sensitive and pays attention to the uses –abuses- of history, and believes that since the historian's subject has important social and political functions being 'the raw material for nationalistic or ethnic or fundamentalist ideologies'. The past is used when the present in some sense unsatisfactory, as a base for providing the model for reconstructing it in a satisfactory form. He thinks that it is the responsibility of historians to resist the *formation* of national, ethnic and other myths, as they are being formed. (p. 34)

He poses that the most usual ideological abuse of history is based on anachronism rather than lies. Even though he accepts that present and the position of historian affects what he writes and for him in some cases it is needed, he seems to take anachronism as something easy to avoid. However it is not possible that historians can manage not to look from the angle of present world and from their own point of view. It can give good results if they come with new and creative questions to ask in order to provide new things from past and if they are aware of their present preconceptions which sometimes need to be detected. However historians often tend to speak about their historical understanding as if it were part of reality itself.

The distinction between fact or fiction

He always defends the view that what historians investigate is real. According to him, "for historians, even for the most militantly anti-positivist ones among us, the ability to distinguish between the two (fact and fiction) is absolutely fundamental. We cannot invent our facts." (p. 7) His generalisations here need to be paid attention. When one looks at the state of historical writing at the last quarter of the twentieth century, s/he can easily discern that people who might be called a-positivists, let alone anti-positivists, are inclined to think that this distinction is somewhat blurred.

There may not be 'lies' about but different 'representations' of the –same- evidence. Even if one admits that evidence reflects the reality as it is –in fact most historians including Hobsbawm do not accept it without doubt-, how we bring it together stays problematic since there is a distinction between statements about discrete historical events, which may be true or false, and 'narrative substances' as Ankersmit calls, which do not have necessarily a reference to historical reality. He seems to say

without any doubt that “what I *cannot* do is simply deny the evidence”, but the evidence “...is not a magnifying glass through which we can study the past, but bears more resemblance to the brushstrokes used by the painter to achieve a certain effect.”³ There are some historians who feel themselves as ‘Marxist’ but put a pen to paper for the critique of the so-called positivistic premises of Marxist theory and conclude with somewhat *relativistic* statements. For instance P. Hirst argues that knowledge constructs what can be counted as evidence and we do not have any guarantee that tests and controls prove the correspondence of thought and reality.⁴

The use of Theory/model

History must analyse both structure and change, both individual and collective phenomena and this is what makes it so difficult. History in that sense requires an analytical framework. For Hobsbawm such a framework must reflect the simultaneous existence of stabilising and disruptive elements since ‘order’ goes with ‘progress’. However “the analysis of the one tells us little about the desirable design of the other.” (p. 25) According to him even though history cannot speak of necessities, it can speak of probabilities. In his words “...the structures of human societies, their processes and mechanisms of reproduction, change and transformation, are such as to restrict the number of things that will happen, and make it possible to assign greater or lesser probabilities to much of the rest.” (p. 51) He makes us remember that Marx, as L. Althusser stresses, thought about a combination and recombination of ‘forms’.

³ F. Ankermit, “Historiography and Postmodernism”, in *History and Theory* edited by B. Fay, P. Pamper & R. Vann, 1998, p. 184.

⁴ P. Hirst, *Marxism and Historical Writing*, 1985, p. 16.

The problems of historical writing He admits that there is a definitive problem in positivistic belief that the questions and the answers arise naturally out of the study of the material. However being still a believer of the possibility of a rational historical enquiry he is strictly against relativism. For him "the non-controversial nature of certain statements and of the means of establishing it must be asserted." (p. 168) The issue of what the past presents historians as knowledge and how they gather them are not problematical issues for him. He uses the terms of knowledge, imagination, or the construction of coherent system of behaviour or thought rather unproblematically. He mentions the problems of, for instance, one's writing of one's own lifetime posing that an individual life-experience is also a collective one, there is a consensus over the landmarks which affects how historians analyse facts, or the differentiation of even one's own writing over time. Nevertheless he does not see in them inherent problems.

The relationship between past and present; the relevance of politics to history

He mentions that the value of historical enquiry for the present, for the solution of any current problem but he also states that history has no simple formula for the solution of the problem or even for discovering the problem itself. However he proposes that history "can pinpoint *one* urgent dimension of the problem, namely the need for social distribution." (p. 43) He accepts and welcomes the relationship between politics and history but with some reservations: He offers that the unity of science and politics may be maintained as a general proposition in theory at least by those who believe that politics should be based on a scientific analysis but he distinguishes the partisanship of the facts from that of people.

For him the difference between it (advocacy) and scientific discussion even if it is somewhat partisan must be clearly borne in mind although he believes in the positive value of partisanship in that “it provides an incentive to change the terms of scientific debate, a mechanism for injecting new topics, new questions and new models of answer from outside.” (p. 180) Therefore it can serve to counteract the tendency to develop intellectual ingenuity for its own sake.

He states that partisanship rests on disagreement about their selection and combination, but not about verified facts. Such a statement reflects an awareness of the ‘inference’ problem, which means that providing ‘facts’ does not guarantee the reliability of what historians do, and even though he does not aim such thing, it also refers to the ‘politics’ of the writing which does not need to be related to ‘partisanship’ but to the preconceptions of the historians which make the story ‘coherent’. To select and combine facts are, in postmodernist understanding as seen before, not an unproblematic process. Selection and combination are to fit facts into a *coherent story* reflecting not reality but its own inner consistency. There, at that point, exists the problem of criteria to measure the capacity of the story reflecting historical reality which Hobsbawm does not find problematic.

II

Marxist Theory of History: Premises and Discussions

The general features of Marxist historical writing and its relation with other trends

According to Hobsbawm, Marx’s historical work is integrated into his theoretical and political writings, which “...consider historical developments in a more or less long-term framework, involving the whole span of human development.

Nevertheless no complete synthesis of the actual process of historical development can be found in Marx.” What Marx wanted to prove *a priori* that communism was the inevitable result of historical development which cannot be shown by historical analysis. However there is one component of Marx’s thought indispensable for history, for him, is the emphasis on the view that an “analysis of any society, at any moment of historical development, must begin with analysis of its mode of production” (p. 214)

He insists on the necessity of the hierarchy of levels in explaining why history has a *direction* since the process of man’s control over nature involves changes both in the forces of production and in the social relations of production, it implies a certain order in the succession of socio-economic systems. However it does not mean that it implies a theory of universal evolution since “this succession of systems cannot be ordered simply in one dimension technological... or economic... but must be also ordered in their social systems.” (p. 214) Historical materialism requires that there should be a succession of modes of production, but not necessarily any ‘particular modes’, and perhaps not in any ‘particular predetermined order’. It insists on a hierarchy of social phenomena and on the existence within any society of ‘contradictions’ which counteract the tendency of the system to maintain itself as a going concern.

Hobsbawm thinks that the social relations of production and reproduction cannot be divorced from each other. He finds extremely wrong to think of historical materialism as a merely *economic* interpretation of history.⁵ He acknowledges the

⁵ E. Hobsbawm, Introduction to *Karl Marx: Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations* edited by Hobsbawm, 1964, p. 17.

determining role of 'social relations of production' besides material forces of production, and he states that a "mode of production embodies both a particular programme of production and a specific, historically occurring set of social relations" (p. 218) and Marxist history must consider both functions and when doing so becomes much fruitful.

He claims that historical materialism, which both inspired a great deal of valuable historical work and influenced non-Marxist historians is important for historical writing. He argues that Marxism as a theory of society insists on a hierarchy of social phenomena. Yet he does not reduce the 'base' to the merely economic and/or technological one but thinks that it refers to social organisation in its broadest sense, as E. Wolf also states: "'real process of production'... is 'the complex set of mutually dependent relations among nature, work, social labour' ..." (p. 212)

To come to the relation of Marxist historical writing or British Marxist Historians in particular with other trends, he stresses the *Annales* School, since the parallelism between the two is somewhat evident. He thinks that the influence and relationship of the *Annales* group and British history is through economic and social history. Marxist historians thought themselves as 'fighting on the same side' as *Annales* since both focused on 'social' in its broadest sense and on the history of 'masses'. Nevertheless he has pointed to "a possible weakness of the *Annales* approach, namely its difficulty in coping with what you call the great formative political events in a country' history: the Risorgimento in Italy, or indeed the French Revolution in France."⁶

⁶ G. Himmelfarb, *The New History and The Old*, 1987, p. 238.

Marx's contribution to history and his special importance for Hobsbawm

Marxist conceptualisation as seen not being history itself but 'a guide to history' is a very crucial programme of research. He always refers to Marx in that he had so much effect on Hobsbawm's intellectual and political development. He goes further saying: "Without Marx I would not have developed any special interest in history.. Marx, and the fields of activity of young Marxist radicals, gave me my subjects of research and inspired the way I wrote about them." (p. ix)

He finds Marxist thought central to history since Marx's insistence on both the existence of social structure and its historicity fits well to the requirements of historical analysis of order and change at the same time. He thinks that Marx's history of theory is "still the only one which enables us to explain the entire span of human history, and forms the most fruitful starting-point for modern discussion" (p. 204) because to aim at investigating 'the development of human societies' means asking questions of Marx's type, if not accepting all his answers.

Main problems, discussions, claims

For the role of 'ideas' as a 'self-sufficient philosophy' in understanding historical flow as we have seen in Thompson's critique of Althusser, Marx declares:

"When reality is described, self-sufficient philosophy loses its medium of existence. At the best its place can only be taken by a summing-up of the most general results, abstractions which are derived from the observation of the historical development of men. These abstractions in themselves, divorced from real history, have no value whatsoever."⁷

⁷ K. Marx & F. Engels, *German Ideology*, 1976, p. 57.

In that sense Marxism can be and has been discussed and under critique in many terms as 'a philosophy of history'. There are serious criticisms towards Marxist theory of history in that it tends to turn into an economic determinism, which makes other elements of society as ineffective in historical course and ignores the role of accident and the individual in history. It presents an inevitable evolutionary trend in the development of material forces of society. Hobsbawm does not think that it affects "... the value of the concept of a 'mode of production', which the Preface defines as 'the aggregate of the productive relationships which constitute the economic structure of a society and form the mode of production of the material means of existence'." (p.219)

Rather he offers two assumptions against economic determinism and the view of inevitability of evolutionary trend: 1) The basic elements within a mode of production tending to destabilise society imply the potentiality rather than the certainty of transformation of it. 2) The mechanisms leading to the transformation of one mode into another may not be exclusively internal to that mode, but may also consist of some external ones and in that sense all development is *mixed* development. (p. 220)

As Melvin Rader also pointed out: "The mode of production is causally more determinant, but all the other structural elements are involved in the 'organic' play of forces. The model of dialectical development characterises this interplay and counteracts a reductionist interpretation of base superstructure."⁸

According to him the main difficulties in Marxist historiography besides and –for the first one in relation with the mentioned ones- are about failing to think out the two

⁸ M. Rader, the review of his own book, *Marx's Interpretation of History*, History and Theory, 1979, no. 18, p. 253.

themes. The first one is the mixed and combined nature of the development of any society or social system, its interaction with other systems and with the past. The other is about the notions of class and class struggle since there has been an increasing awareness of the existence of other social formations than class, and of the complex nature of class struggle which cannot be reduced only to economical tensions.

When he takes into consideration the state of Marxist history today he sees that it takes Marx as its starting-point rather than its point of arrival. It prefers to use his methods rather than commenting on his texts. Marxist history today tends to be pluralistic in many ways since there seems to be no central theme and concepts, no authoritative voice and methodology. It is very much interrelated with the remainder of historical thinking and research. (pp. 223-4)

III

Social history: Premises and Discussions

Preceding trends to social history

When Hobsbawm speaks of 'orthodox history' i.e. Rankean historiography firstly he mentions that its essential subject-matter is primarily politics and especially the foreign policies, of nation-states. Secondly he states that "it rejected any attempt to bring the various aspects of the past into systematic structural or causal relation to one another, especially any attempt to derive politics from economic and social factors, above all any models of evolutionary development of human societies (though its own practice implied such a model)" (p. 80) He reminds the converse condition of the twentieth century since what one can see essentially about this

century of historiography is that a close relationship between history and social sciences, the 'orthodox historians' of the nineteenth century rejected completely. Even though they were correct in opposing generalisation insufficiently supported by fact, they were wrong in their belief that hypotheses arise automatically from the study of 'facts'. He here seems to be more responsive to the insufficiency or fallacy of the positivistic belief that facts are gathered and reflect reality immediately.

The features of the history of society and its problems

In his well-known article, "From Social History to the History of Society" (1970), he speaks of three sometimes overlapping meanings of social history used in the past. "First, it referred to the history of the poor and lower classes, and more specifically to the history of the movements of the poor ('social movements')... Second, the term was used to refer to works on a variety of human activities difficult to classify except in such terms as 'manners, customs, everyday life'... The third meaning of the term was certainly the most common and for our purposes the most relevant: 'social' was in combination with 'economic history' ." (pp. 94-95) These definitions refer respectively to history from below, cultural history, and socio-economic history. He gives importance to the last one as an outcome of the relation of history with economy and sociology which defined the earlier form of social history and also, in fact, his historical writing totally in many years and continues to define mostly.

He finds the reason behind rapid development of social history after 1950 as being the deliberate specialisation of economic history, the world-wide growth of sociology as an academic subject, and of the general historisation of the social sciences during this period. He prefers to use the term 'the history of society' to

emphasise the interrelationship between social, economic and political factors of society and he counts features of such kind of history as follows⁹:

- a- The history of society is *history*. That means history has real chronological time as one of its dimensions and is concerned with what actually happened.
- b- It is the history of societies as well as of human society, which necessitates an anthropological understanding as well as a sociological understanding.
- c- The history of societies requires historians to apply, if not a formalised model of structures, then at least an approximate order of research priorities and a working assumption about what constitutes the central nexus of connections of their subject, though of course these things imply a *model*.

Developments, new orientations

He pays attention to the divergence and fragmentation in social history with the spectacular expansion of the field of historical studies. He is also concerned with the shifts in historical subject-matter and interests i.e. the turn from macro analysis of structures to micro analysis of mentalities with a discovery of otherness. He thinks that the problem of mentalities is related to finding "... a logical connection between various forms of behaviour, of thinking and feeling, to see them as being mutually consistent." (p. 244) In that sense historical studies of mentalities are not results of historical empathy or archaeology or of social psychology, "but of the discovery of the internal logical cohesion of systems of thought and behaviour which fit in with the way in which people live in society in their particular class and in their particular situation of the class struggle..." (p. 245) He is critical of the quantification in historical studies and against that economic history turns to a 'retrospective

⁹ E. Hobsbawm, *On History*, pp. 105-108.

economics', even though he was originally an economic historian and he found –also finds still- the place of economy in historical explanation indispensable.

About microhistorical studies, he does not think that a reduction in scale creates a discrepancy between macro and micro studies. For him it is a matter of nuance: “There is thus no necessary contradiction between Le Roy Ladurie’s *Les Paysans du Languedoc* and his *Montaillou*, any more than between Duby’s general works on feudal society and his monograph on the battle of Bouvines, or between E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* and his *Whigs and Hunters*. There is nothing new in choosing to see the world via a microscope rather than a telescope.” (p. 273)

Challenges

Having in his mind the ‘return of politics’ and of ‘narrative’ in relation with microhistory he comments on the new history of men and minds, ideas and events as being ‘complementary’. For instance political history has gradually returned but by borrowing the methods of social sciences. In that sense they do not supplant the analysis of socio-economic structures and trends. Lawrence Stone in his famous article evaluates the increase in microscopic studies in the late 1970s as a sign of a revival of ‘narrative history’. Hobsbawm finds difficult to determine whether they amount to that kind of turn or not since he thinks, again, that they are different attempts to capture the same ideal i.e. to give a historical synthesis about any given society and period.

He strongly defends that the objective reality is accessible though not immediately, and finds postmodernist view dangerous for it offers that what historians study is only a construction of their minds and there is no criteria to distinguish which construction is 'valid' or that any construction is in principle as valid as another. He believes that without the distinction 'between what is' and 'what it is not', there can be no history –and it is undoubtedly an unacceptable conclusion for him. He concludes that historical texts can be fictions as being 'literary compositions' but the raw material of them is verifiable fact. (p. 358) Except the extreme prepositions of postmodernist view, he finds all developments and changes occurred in the historiography of the last quarter of the twentieth century normal and necessary, and complementary to the history of society, which is still being constructed according to him. (p. 123)

I have tried in that part to present an introductory analysis of Hobsbawm's reflections on historical writing as well as his historical prose. Let us turn a sketchy evaluation of his way of writing and of his thoughts on historical writing.

The Titles of The Articles

- 1) "Outside and Inside of History", pp. 1-12. (1992)
- 2) "The Sense of the Past", pp. 13-31. (1970)
- 3) "What Can History Tell Us about Contemporary Society?", pp. 32-48. (1984)
- 4) "Looking Forward: History and the Future", pp. 49-73. (1981)
- 5) "Has History Made Progress?", pp. 74-93. (1979)
- 6) "From Social History to the History of Society", pp. 94-123. (1970)
- 7) "Historians and Economists: I", pp. 124-143. (1980)
- 8) "Historians and Economists: II", pp. 144-163. (1980)
- 9) "Partisanship", pp. 164-185. (1979)
- 10) "What Do Historians Owe to Karl Marx?", pp. 186-206. (1969)
- 11) "Marx and History", pp. 207-225. (1973)
- 12) "All Peoples Have a History", pp. 226-235. (1983)
- 13) "British History and *Annales*: A Note", pp. 236-245. (1978)
- 14) "On the Revival of Narrative", pp. 246-253. (1980)
- 15) "Postmodernism in the Forest", pp. 254-265. (1990)
- 16) "On History from Below", pp. 266-286. (1985)
- 17) "The Curious History of Europe", pp. 287-301. (1996)
- 18) "The Present as History", pp. 302-318. (1993)
- 19) "Can We Write the History of the Russian Revolution", pp. 319-333. (1996)
- 20) "Barbarism: User's Guide", pp. 334-350. (1994)
- 21) "Identity History is not Enough", pp. 351-366. (1994)



***SOCIAL HISTORY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY TODAY
IN THE LIGHT OF AN INDIVIDUAL HISTORIAN'S
WRITING OF HISTORY AND THEORY OF HISTORY***

Chapter Seven

An Evaluation of Hobsbawm's Historical Writing in terms of the Trends of the Twentieth Century Historiography

*"The historian is continually involved in a dialogue with the past, with himself, and with his readers, including his professional milieu that verifies the results of his work. All that is somehow present in the narrative and shapes it."*¹

For Gertrude Himmelfarb, Hobsbawm makes the 'politics of class struggle' central to history, and 'historical materialism' central to Marxism.² The statement is right in the sense that from the angle of historical studies Hobsbawm appreciates Marxist theory, and in terms of Marxism he assigns the foremost place to history in theoretical construction. Accordingly he acknowledges the importance of theory but insists on the inseparability of theory and practice; he warns about the reduction of scholarship to ideological means but again insists on the relevance and positive value of political commitment to scholarship; he believes that there are some 'forms' that set limits to the intervention of human beings to the events, but he recognises them as active agents against the reduction of the past into numerical relationships.

He is a social historian as well as a Marxist one, and it is overt that they are somewhat interrelated. He is a political and social commentator, who tries to embrace the general reader as well as scholars and committed partisans. Even if he focuses on Europe and the nineteenth century, his interests are so wide-ranging that

¹J. Topolski, "A Non-Postmodernist Analysis of Historical Narratives" in *Historiography Between...*, 1994, p. 37.

²G. Himmelfarb, *The New History and The Old*, 1987, p.81.

cannot be reduced to that region and era. He writes about the current discussions of social, economic and political problems of world of today as well as he participates in the political debates on the nature and the future of socialism as a movement.

I

Hobsbawm as a social historian

Hobsbawm's historical writing can be called as long-term and multidirectional one: 'total' history. This approach is related to the analysis of historical events in the process in which they are placed, and of different -interrelated- aspects of social phenomena. Aiming at such a totality in historical writing can be held under the title of social history. He too uttered this aim explicitly. For the interrelatedness of the social phenomena: "...I have always wanted to know how all these aspects of the past (or present) life hang together, and why"³. For the relationship between past and present: "My object is to understand and explain *why* things turned out the way they did..."⁴. He tries to analyse the past 'as a coherent whole' in relation with today.

He states that he aims 'the history of society' in a broader sense, a history consisting of intellectual, ideological, political, social and economic history; even though he gives much more importance to economic factors in historical investigation as being originally an economic historian. Yet in his project of writing world history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, he gives more place to culture and arts in the latter ones –seen as a result of the emphasis on culture in historical studies-, and tries to tackle with the interrelationship of economic, social and cultural factors in society, whereas he assigns the central place to economic history in the earlier volumes.

³ E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire*, 1987, In the 'Preface'.

⁴ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*, 1994, p. 3.

For example he analyses economic fluctuations or cultural revolutions interrelatedly and speaks of the importance of such a method: "...in order to see how culture and science came into what they are today as being results of the conditions of the socio-historical period in which they are placed even though they have also their own line of advancement, I have tried so much to make their independent development and the conditions of their historical period come together. I believe that it is the main function of history if not the only."⁵

It can be also seen from his division of chapters of the books and his use of concepts. He always reserves chapters to trace the developments in arts, sciences and other fields in relation with economic ones in the period he is interested in. In *Age of Extremes* he analyses the twentieth century in three separate periods referring to different conditions and as a result different developments even though they are related to each other in some way. He names a period with a concept, for instance 'Golden Age', and then he analyses all events in terms of this main concept and makes sense of them around it.

He calls his historical writing as 'unfolding an argument' rather than a 'narrative or systematic exposition'.⁶ He always tries to capture the world in question in 'its own reality' but with its evolution today. What he does can be called as factual analysis through the evaluation of them by means of theoretical tools. Each of his books aims at telling about the specificity of a period in question but much more than this, tracing some social phenomena, which have reached today. He draws facts together into a general historical synthesis without ignoring the extraordinary character of a

⁵ "Eric Hobsbawm'la Söyleşi...", *Birikim*, no. 85, 1996, p. 69.

⁶ E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire*, In the 'Preface'.

period, which really has no parallel in history, and whose very uniqueness makes it strange and remote.

The aim of writing total history determines the way of his writing in many ways. Since such an aim necessitates a structural and comparative thinking for different features of society related to each other and different parts of the world, his language is close to conceptualisation and structured around universal terms. He makes use of many sources to support his argument such as statistics (as a complementary technique), maps, photographs, and other non-official evidence (such as letters as in the case of *Bandits*) in accordance with his aim of writing total history. What about causality? He believes in its place in historical writing but he emphasises the possible forms of structural changes. In spite of his adherence to the base-superstructure model, he does not seek to establish simple causal relations between economics and politics or culture.

For Hobsbawm social history “has rendered possible a better understanding of what has made man what he is today than anything Ranke and Lord Acton did.”⁷ Through the relationship between social history and social sciences Hobsbawm’s historical writing developed and changed its face gradually, as we have seen in his making a link with sociology and economy in labour history and with anthropology in peasant studies. In his labour studies he “...has always been interested in the totality of class experience not just socially, but also in terms of the broader development of capitalism, which he rightly argues has been a world-historical phenomenon.”⁸ In his peasant studies he outlines the historical development of the tradition of what he

⁷ E. Hobsbawm, *On History*, 1998, p. 84.

⁸ H. Kaye, *British Marxist Historians*, 1984, p. 157.

terms social banditry. They involve a discussion of the responses of certain social groups to a growing capitalism with a sense of alienation from their political, social, or economic situation. In his trilogy and the later book following them he attempted to write world history. They are good examples of Hobsbawm's efforts to work through the problem of 'totality'.

II

The importance of Marxist Theory for his historical writing

Marxist thought and historical materialism in particular are indispensable components of Hobsbawm's intellectual and political formation. He analyses the world of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism, his main era and subject, in terms of the class-structured and 'determined' struggles of that century. Even though his work has been very much a part of the development of their theory of class determination, Hobsbawm has not been much more willing to reject the base-superstructure model than the other British Marxist historians.⁹ Economic factors and forces are given a central role in Hobsbawm's studies. He is much "... inclined to think that the possible value of economics for the historian of society is great."¹⁰ It does not mean he tends to apply economic determinism in his studies. Hobsbawm is quite critical of vulgar Marxist influence on history reducing historical process to economic explanations, since he believes that history is the struggle of men for ideas, as well as a reflection of their material environments.

Marxist analysis gives way for him to realise his aim of writing total history in two senses: for him in terms of the interdependence of social phenomena, the benefit of

⁹ *ibid.* p. 132.

¹⁰ E. Hobsbawm, *On History*, p. 104.

the model of 'infrastructure-superstructure' is to be able to show that social relations, technology, culture, social institutions etc. are more or less interrelated. In terms of the relation between events and structures he observed, "the immense strength of Marx has always lain in his insistence on both existence of social structure and its historicity, or in other words its internal dynamic of change."¹¹

For him the mode of production as the base of our understanding of the variety of human societies and their interactions, as well as of their historical dynamics keeps its validity in his historical studies but the urgent need that Marx's own model must be made more explicit than it is in his writings must be admitted.¹² He believes that conventional Marxism necessitates some corrections. The role of political and cultural elements in society must be emphasised making use of the concepts from other disciplines such as anthropology.

Hobsbawm believes that Marx provided the most effective conceptual tools for broader comprehension and explanation of society and social change in the past, and continues to find Marx's materialist conception of history the 'best guide by far to history'. He sees it as the basis of historical explanation rather than historical explanation itself, measured by its capacity to produce new and productive knowledge, not by confirmations or disconfirmations of its predictions. He thinks that Marxism is much more productive than other approaches in history since it is more clearly "... aware of what human beings can do as the subjects and makers of history as well as what, as objects of history, they can't."¹³ He mentions that Marxist

¹¹ G. Iggers, *New Directions in European Historiography*, 1984, p.40.

¹² E. Hobsbawm, *On History*, p. 217.

¹³ *ibid*, p. 86.

historical method due to its flexibility functions well in the specific case of the history of society, for it aims at providing both general models of social structure and change, and the specific set of phenomena, which actually occurred.

As he is in favour of the belief that history must illuminate today, whom he writes for are not only the professionals, but the intellectual people, who try to understand the world in which they live. He is a scholar, who is concerned with the interpretation of the past to understand today and aims at contributing to the solutions of today's socio-political problems making use of historical works as we have seen in the specific case of his *The New Century* and his numerous articles. He participates and leads in discussions about the problems of current Left political strategy.

III

History and historical trends

Even though it is not possible for Hobsbawm to consider historical facts as if they depict historical reality of one moment in time directly by themselves, he accepts that there exist 'facts' and believes in that sense the possibility of reaching 'reality'. Our preferences, priorities and ways of understanding make us present different explanations about the same historical data but this does not mean we are out of reality, rather it means that we put emphasis on different sides of the same reality. However for him historians must be cautious about and indeed responsible for the deformation of historical facts such as misuse of historical sources in the name of nationalistic and fundamentalist trends.

He poses that the historians “have a responsibility to historical facts in general, and for criticising the politico-ideological abuse of history in particular.”¹⁴ He insists the ‘supremacy of evidence’ and the centrality of the distinction between verifiable historical fact and fiction, and finds that it is the one of the ways of exercising the historian’s responsibility. He admits that a definitive history is not possible but thinks that history as a *rational* activity with scientific premises is possible unlike some postmodernist thinkers, like H. White, think that it is not. Hobsbawm states that history “...is one which does not invent but arranges objects *trouves*”¹⁵ even if it is an imaginative art as they claim. He offers that science is a dialogue between different views based upon a common method. It “only ceases to be science when there is no method for deciding which of the contending views is wrong or less fruitful”,¹⁶ being against postmodernist view again.

In Hobsbawm’s view historical studies, however microcosmic, must be for universalism, since it is necessary condition for understanding the history of humanity, including that of any special section of humanity.¹⁷ In order to realise it historians “...establish a greater unity of our practice and theory,... to watch what we are doing, to generalize it, and to correct it in the light of the problems arising out of further practice.”¹⁸ He aims to write for all who wish to understand the world and who believe history is important for this purpose. He believes that history can explain the roots of the way of our life and illuminate today in that sense, and that by means of the ideal of ‘total history’, this aim can be reached.

¹⁴E. Hobsbawm, *On History*, p. 6.

¹⁵ *ibid.* p. 359.

¹⁶ *ibid.* p. 224.

¹⁷ *ibid.* p. 365.

¹⁸ *ibid.* p. 109.

IV

Main shortcomings of Hobsbawm's historical writing

The main possible difficulty landed in Hobsbawm's writings is about his Marxism. Does Marxist tone skew his history? Daniel Snowman replies this question as follows: "... no more than the work of anyone guided by overall vision. Since you cannot write about several hundred years of world history without one."¹⁹ One can discern his adherence to the base-superstructure model in his evaluations and analysis of events. For example in *The Age of Capital, 1848-1875*, he equates hegemony easily with 'ideological predominance'.²⁰ However he can manage to distance "...himself from Marx's prophecies about the future of socialist advance" although "he reiterated his faith in the spirit of Marx's method."²¹

The other shortcomings can be counted as follows: Since he believes the necessity of the intellectual leadership of a strongly organised party, he underestimates the significance of the 'inherent ideas' of the common people. His evident interest in cultural and ideological subjects, may be due to his emphasis on the model, has not "... provided the kinds of analyses of the ideas of the common people which are found in Hill's writings".²² He aims at showing that a class 'in the full sense' emerges out of class struggle but unlike Thompson could not present a detailed study of such a process.²³

In his world histories he is criticised in that he is biased towards European history. His answer is in that way in an interview with Daniel Snowman: "Because of the

¹⁹ Hobsbawm, in conversation with D. Snowman, *History Today*, January, 1999.

²⁰ H. Kaye, *British Marxist Historians*, p. 157.

²¹ D. Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain*, 1997, pp. 253-4.

²² *ibid.* p.156.

²³ *ibid.* p.155.

nature of the questions I address. If you are dealing with the history of modern capitalism and the world economy, your analysis has got to be Eurocentric right up until the late nineteenth century and the appearance of the USA as a world player.”²⁴ Although in his essay , “Man and Woman in Socialist Iconography” (1978), he “acknowledged that male historians, including Marxists, had ignored the history of women”²⁵, he was, like Thompson, criticised by the feminist historians in that he did not appreciate the role of women in the working class formation, and committed to the Marxist conceptions of class which is inadequate to define other divisions such as gender, race, ethnicity, and life style.

V

Any researcher does not face the reality s/he studies as if s/he were a tabula rasa. Hence, s/he can at most only control the scope of the mentioned imputation. Hobsbawm is generally aware of what might be seen as problems in his historical writing but it is arguable that he can most of the time handle with them. However it must be admitted that as a Marxist historian in each case he has brought new empirical evidence to bear on the conventional Marxist view, or has given orthodox Marxism as somewhat different reading. With his labour and peasant studies he has contributed to the reconceptualization of the very term of ‘politics’ in a broader sense.

He believes that historians must analyse the past both under the lights of the thoughts and experiences of the people who lived in those days and in terms of the connection with today, with the emphasis on the differences as well as the similarities between

²⁴ Hobsbawm, in conversation with D. Snowman.

²⁵ D. Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism*, p.199.

the past and the present. He is a social historian but due to his aim of writing total history he represents one wing of social history. He is close to the theoretical constructions of social sciences even though he is very empirical in that he deals with numerous historical facts in his works. His aim can be defined as displaying what historical events mean for the historical process in general terms with 'a bird's eye view' rather than showing the peculiarity of historical events in a strict chronological order. This aim represents *one* side of social history, which tries to answer the requirements of theorisation for the realisation of the aim of total history.

No doubt he does not consist of most of varieties, which can be taken into consideration under the title of social history. Yet he reflects the main premises of social history, the very denominator what might be called as 'Scientific Attitude'. Many historians find problematic –without quitting to claim a rational enquiry- the optimism regarding the nature and direction of the modern world on which social science history rested since the premises of modern world were shaken by fundamental changes in the structure of social existence in a late industrial world. Hobsbawm agrees with them in many ways. However unlike them he continues to see the Enlightenment faith in reason and science as a means of liberating man rather than a means of controlling and manipulating them.

Concluding Remarks

*“That the Rhetorical and the Scientific Attitudes need one another for each to remain coherent helps to explain why the history of thought has so often been marked by a swing from one pole to the other.”*¹ B. Fay.

*“... history is an organised discipline of study, neither science nor poetry and endowed with the imprimatur of academic respectability.”*² Marvin Levich.

Through the Enlightenment thinking reason or rationality is considered to be solely means to knowledge, which is reduced to scientific i.e. quantitative formulations, and it is claimed that there is absolute knowledge to be attained. Robert Nisbet, on the contrary, speaks of three universal constraints on human cognition:

First, awareness of the element of *art* that lies in all efforts to grasp reality, no matter how undergirded by pretentious methodologies ... may be; second, that however one proceeds, with whatever degree of objectivity and devotion to truth, he cannot escape the limitations imposed by the form of his enquiry; and third, that many words through which social scientists, humanists and others approach reality are unalterably metaphoric.³

At the outset of the new century, historians, as well as the scholars from the other disciplines, are aware of such kinds of constraints and they are wary of averring the absolute character of what they are doing. The scientific production is now seen as an interaction between hypotheses and disprovements or critical thinking and creativity,

¹ B. Fay, Introduction to *History and Theory*, 1998, p. 9.

² Quoted in “Turning Linguistic” by R. Vann, *A New Philosophy of History*, ed. by F. Ankersmit & H. Kellner, 1995, p. 52.

³ L. Stone, in “History and the Social Sciences in the Twentieth Century” p. 42., quoted from *The Cult of the Fact* by Hudson, p. 155.

and it seems to be a more convenient definition for history. The aim of capturing historical reality has been still protected since historians "...by no means gave up the conviction that the historian must follow rational methods to gain truthful insights into the past."⁴ History has not broken off an implicit 'consensus' upon the criteria about the way of writing it. It is inclined to develop this consensus without eliminating its varieties in order to meet the necessities of its bipolar nature.

It is a bipolar discipline, oscillating from one pole⁵ to another, in at least two sense: Firstly it is concerned with both individual and society, events and structures, ideas and material conditions at the same time. Secondly, it requires both narrativist –to revive the past- and analytical skills –to interpret it in its totality. In regard with the former, historians neither can be satisfied with grasping the uniqueness of historical personalities and collectivities nor with the analysing quantifiable factors unaffected by human action. Thus, they must do both. That is the possible –and a little bit easy- answer of what is needed to make history a 'rational enquiry'. To give an answer to the question about the validity or the invalidity of the scientificity claim of historiography, or of the claim itself is much more problematic.

I

We have seen that history moves from one period to another. The period in which one attitude dominates is followed by the other in which the opposite attitude is in the

⁴ G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century*, p. 100.

⁵ I use the terms pole or bipolar for the sake of clarity. Some thinkers do not think that for instance Science and Rhetoric are opposed to one another for every historical prose is a representation and all representations consist of Rhetoric.

ascendant. They are not mutually exclusive or independent from one another. As Brian Fay pointed out: "When the Rhetorical Attitude excludes the Scientific Attitude it ultimately ends in the breakdown of the communication which the Rhetorical Attitude was meant to highlight." It is also true for the other way round: "Science seeks the melody of reality by filtering out its noise. But this requires criteria of significance and concepts by virtue of which these criteria are expressed. Such criteria, concepts, and methods are rhetorical tools."⁶ What he offers is that they need one another for their viability. Nevertheless historians generally stress one side repressing the other, in practice and much more in their discourse about the *right way to make history*..

Social history has claimed that history must be a 'social science'⁷, with emphases both on *science* and *social* sides of the term. It shared some prepositions of the Rankean historiography in terms of *scientific* premises but differed from it in terms of being concerned with *social* as a totality. Social historians continue(d) to be committed, as the older ones, to the presupposition that the scholarly writing of history required a rigorous critical examination and evaluation of the sources. They, not unlike older ones, were also firmly convinced of the quality of modern Western civilisation. They saw it as a universal progressive process. Through the anthropological insights historians have begun to focus on the points that there is no universal 'man' and 'civilization' prevailing the human kind, and that the validity of rational enquiry is open to discussion since historical events can be represented in a number of different ways resulting in different interpretations of those events.

⁶ B. Fay, Introduction to *History and Theory*, pp.8-9.

⁷ As we have seen what the *Annales* School wanted to realise in general was the collaboration of history with not only with social sciences but also with humanities since to aim at capturing 'totality' makes it needed.

The aim of structural analysis which social history brought into the field of history can be criticised in many ways but it does not mean that one can ignore its contributions to the works of historians. With *structural* analyses they begin to analyse how the social mechanism behind individual events works and begin to search for the 'general' in individual events. "Historical writing was enormously enriched by the expansion of its subject-matter, and by the ideal of 'total history'."⁸ Even for Schama, the writer of *Citizens*, which is an example of a return to 'the form of the nineteenth-century chronicles' as the author himself calls it, history is for two purposes: "For witnessing, narration and recreation. At the same time for argumentation and analysis."⁹

By means of the link with social sciences history has gained a crucial insight into the understanding of man in many ways, and opened new paths to the exploration of human consciousness and culture. Such a give and take not only contributed to the discipline of history, but also the other way round: "It is the consciousness that all 'structures' are subject to change (however slow) that is, according to Braudel, the historian's special contribution to the social sciences."¹⁰ Both the *Annales* School and British Marxist historians "recognized that political behavior and expression of ideas can never be understood as self-explanatory but must be studied in a social context" and "believe that this study demands rigorous methodological guidelines and requires high degree of conceptualization."¹¹ Needless to say, social historians do not all adhere to the same position but they agree on the 'starting point' – that is, they agree on the existence of the

⁸ P. Burke, *New Perspectives*, 1992, p. 245.

⁹ S. Schama, "1789 Vesaire", *Toplum ve Bilim*, 1991, p. 96.

¹⁰ P. Burke, *French Historical Revolution*, 1990, p. 42.

¹¹ G. Iggers, *New Directions*, p. 85.

truth telling capacity of history, however it is limited. In that sense, from the angle of the claim that history is a rigorous cognitive enterprise, I venture to say that Hobsbawm is a good representative of social history, and somewhat 'orthodox' in that he expresses some reservations but less unwillingly than many do.

II

The historians, who have the desire to realise the studies having a theoretical structure, by models, can do well when they begin to be sensitive to the varieties. Social history is experiencing such kind of developments as seen in the examples of Hobsbawm, Thompson or Le Roy Ladurie, as we have seen for instance in their increasing emphasis on the role of culture in historical flow. Social history has to and tries to embrace criticisms directed towards it in terms of incapability of handling two-fold nature of the discipline. But then, what about the claim of abandoning the aim of recapturing 'reality' as much as possible?

Postmodernist historiography in its extreme form viewed history as having no reference to a reality outside of its texts. However, practising historians seldom went so far. The new cultural history no longer uses the concepts and methods from the social sciences unproblematically but it does not mean that the link with the social sciences has been broken, but rather it shifted one to another, for example anthropology and semiotics to explore the collective consciousness, values, and meaning viewing human beings as active agents in historical situations. "Historians have not been moving away from the

social sciences, but from a mechanistic, mathematical model of those disciplines.”¹²

They acknowledge the limits of human freedom, to which the structural historians of the 1950s and 1960s had pointed; at the same time, they accent the role of human intervention in shaping historical world.

The role of cultural factors among which language occupies a key place is emphasised but in the sense that historians seek to examine the relationship between social and linguistic interpretation. Postmodernist thought has made a substantial contribution to the contemporary historical discussions by its warnings against the belief in the conception of -universal- progress and in the authority of science in terms of reaching ‘absolute knowledge’ since there is no absolute knowledge and no authority, then, to speak of it. It stems from the awareness of the ‘deep roots of culture’ which determine our structuring the world, forced by the ‘weariness of modern society’ “resulting from accumulation of information, which cannot be mastered individually by anyone as well as the feeling of being lost in the world of contemporary culture ...”¹³

This can be an explanation for an increasing interest in artistic dimension of knowledge, for art “...would be counterbalance for modern atomization of a cognitive process which leads to a disintegrated picture of the world we are tired of.”¹⁴ We need an *aesthetisation* of our cognitive practices. It seems to me that postmodernist historiography refers to this need in general as a necessary critical reexamination of historiography, not to the repudiation of it as a discipline.

¹² E. Hobsbawm, *On History*, p. 251.

¹³ T. Kostyrko, “Remarks on the ‘Aesthetization’ in Science on the Basis of History”, *Historiography Between*, p. 215.

¹⁴ *ibid.* p. 216.

History has some possibility of meeting this need in some sense, in search of "...a way to re-conceive representation, objectivity, the past's relation to the present, and historical meaning which can acknowledge the insights of the Rhetorical Attitude..."¹⁵, and social history in particular seems to take into consideration today the warnings of Lawrence Stone saying:

"Only if the two principles of methodological diversity and ideological pluralism are vigorously defended will the necessary intellectual interchange between the historian and the social scientist continue to be fruitful one..."¹⁶

III

We have seen historiography has always experienced an oscillation from one pole to another which is *endless*, but by witnessing the 'returns' with 'new' faces. What makes a return *new* is related to the fact that it offers a 'paradigm shift' both in the sense it defends the most premises of what was subordinated before against the existing one and also in the sense that it *transforms* what it hinges upon with a different way of looking as we have seen in the case of the new historicism with postmodernist undertone. How do those transformations make difference in the practice of historians?

They all write histories by being affected from the existing trends no doubt and it is a necessary condition for their production. However the discussions made at the level of theory of history do not change their ways of writing all at one and totally. This is because the ascendant trend does not and cannot eliminate the others, which continue to

¹⁵ B. Fay, Introduction *History and Theory*, pp 6-7.

¹⁶ L. Stone, "History and...", p. 43.

determine the historical writing of some historians. For instance the growing effect of postmodernist historiography does not prevent historians from writing 'structural narratives' even if they accept the validity of some of its claims and are affected from it. This is why today Hobsbawm's work, as a case for structural analysis, is widely read.

However historians have learnt the problems of the project of recapturing reality or the complexity of this process, which can never reach finality by means of the so-called postmodernist critique. It necessitates some *little* and *big* revolutions as Kuhn calls in *The Essential Tension*. The little revolutions "...result from a new kind of solution to a battery of problems that have created a self-avowed crisis in a preceding body of knowledge" as we have witnessed in the case of the turn to micro analysis and culture in social history, while the big ones "...may change not only how the world is described but also its very texture"¹⁷ as we have seen in the case of the linguistic turn.

History needs both kinds of transformations. It is so a difficult discipline in that saying true things about the past is easy but saying the *right* things about the past is difficult and it is that "truly requires historical insight and originality."¹⁸ There can be 'no ultimate theory of history' but 'a theory of historical writing'¹⁹ and this is what historians –must– insist on. Historians in general, and social historians in particular, still tend to prefer "...a historiography that is fully conscious of the complexity of historical knowledge but still assumes that real people had real thoughts and feelings that led to real actions that,

¹⁷ I. Hacking, in his review of *The Essential Tension*, *History and Theory*, 18, p. 236.

¹⁸ F. Ankersmit, "Reply to Professor Zagorin", *History and Theory*, p. 209.

¹⁹ H. White, in *Encounters*, 1994, p. 17.

within limits, can be known and reconstructed”²⁰ to a theory, which denies any claim to reality in historical accounts.

To conclude I can reiterate what Burke speaks for social history for the general advancement of historiography, or even knowledge itself:

“We are still a long way away from the ‘total history’ advocated by Braudel. Indeed, it would be unrealistic to believe that this goal could ever be attained- but a few more steps have been taken towards it.”²¹



²⁰ G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century*, p. 119.

²¹ P. Burke, “Overture: The New History..”, *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, p. 20.

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