

Creighton lecture intro :Eric Hobsbawm

Virginia Berridge 17.04.08.

I well remember attending this lecture in 1993 and was immediately able to retrieve my notes on it. As I sat in the Beveridge Hall, on the left hand raised side adjacent to the stage, I thought back to the first time I had heard Eric Hobsbawm lecture. Then I had been sitting in exactly the same spot. I was an undergraduate at Westfield College in Hampstead. We students all used to come down to Senate House for the intercollegiate lectures on European history each Monday and that set of seats was our regular territory. The lecturers were the cream of the University –I remember Joel Hurstfield's being greeted with a burst of applause, something which our students in this more demonstrative age often do now, but which was certainly not common then.

Eric's lecture in that series had been quite different to the rest. He loped on to the stage and gave an incisive and wide ranging performance which linked the events of the nineteenth century to contemporary issues such as Cuba and Vietnam. At the time, I thought this was just wonderful and exciting; it was the first time in my university career when anything I'd been taught had seemed remotely relevant. I could not have been very organized because for some while afterwards I thought that the wonderful lecturer had been Douglas Dakin (in fact the previous week's speaker), obviously a very different kettle of fish, although also from Birkbeck. Subsequently I became one of Eric's postgraduate students and attended the seminars he ran at the Institute of Historical Research- but that is another story.

It was not just nostalgia which brought me to Senate House again in November 1993. Eric's topic, writing the history of one's own times, was very close to my heart . I wanted to hear what a master of the craft had to say about it. At that time, I was researching and writing the history of HIV/AIDS and policy making, a subject which, in its immediacy (policy making in the UK had really only begun in the mid 1980s, not even 10 years before) many considered to be inappropriate for historical analysis. Eric stressed the importance of whether or not the historian has lived through the events under

consideration, using his own experience of the rise of Nazism and the Second World War as a counterpoint to the recent reinterpretations by younger historians. This struck a chord with me which I noted at the time. I had found the same in a different way with interpretations of the initial response to HIV. These had been characterised by sociologists as ‘moral panic’ within that well known framework. I had found myself in disagreement with this interpretation through personal experience. In 1986 I had been scientific secretary to a drug addiction research initiative and my experience then of the early response to HIV in the UK led me to interpret the policy response as a panic which was ‘real’ rather than ‘moral’, not homophobic (gay men in policy were among the key players), but a genuine period of ‘grande peur’ in elite governing circles. Living through history had formed an interpretation different from that of those who had not.

The need to escape from the assumptions of the time-which he stresses- is something which has to be borne in mind when one is researching and writing about events which still have current significance. In writing the contemporary history of controversial areas, it is better in my view to be a ‘policy cool’ rather than a ‘policy hot’. And reference to the potentially unmanageable excess of sources for contemporary history was all too relevant. Printed sources there were in abundance for HIV/AIDS. But at this time in the 1990s there was no Freedom of Information and Open Government had not produced very much on recent history. I had to rely for my archival sources on key players in the field who let me have unofficial access to the minutes of committees and on other sympathetic people with access. Now of course it is different. More archives are theoretically available, although not all departments are able to produce them, as I have found with recent research. The Home Office’s record keeping leaves much to be desired. But technology, the ability to use digitized sources for example, is potentially transforming the modes of research, and not just for contemporary history.

In the ‘90s, I also used oral history intensively and have continued to do so. Here I part company with Eric’s dismissal of it in the lecture. I don’t agree that one needs to know more than the interviewee to get much out of the encounter or that memories are mostly ‘wrong’. The issue of memory has been much discussed by oral historians and would

take a chapter on its own to debate Knowing a lot I can in fact be counterproductive :
professing ignorance can be a good tactic in the interview ,but clearly that was not Eric's
style in his Fabian oral histories .

The end of the lecture , delivered not so long after the end of the USSR and the changes
in Eastern Europe ,brought with it a recognition of the defeat of hopes and the political
cause embodied in Communism initiated by the October revolution. But defeat was to
bring a sharper historical perspective. Eric's personal history against this backdrop has
been much discussed since, in particular since the publication of his autobiography. Both
for the older historian delivering the lecture and for the younger one listening to him, the
passage of time and the themes of the lecture came together in an ending which was as
elegant as ever, yet charged with emotion. Yet now, fifteen years later, would this
response still be the same? What Eric would call 'short term movements of the historical
weather' might once more affect the perspective on such events.