

The Age of Empire

E.Hobsbawm

Jan 28 - Feb 6, 2005

With the present volume Hobsbawm comes to the conclusion of his trilogy on the long 19th century. The century of the triumph of Capitalism, initiated by the dual revolutions of the industrial and the French, the latter giving a convenient date; and concluding with the more or less inevitable cataclysm of the Great War, thus in many ways concurring with the analysis of Lenin, for whom the author expresses great intellectual admiration, in which imperialism is the final (or at least most recent) stage of Capitalism. But, as Hobsbawm is forced to acknowledge in his epilogue, the War did not result in the collapse of Capitalism, which turned out to be far more resilient than had been envisioned. But the essence of its resilience was its capacity to reform and adjust, and the main thesis of Hobsbawm is that the Russian Revolution, the defining moment of the Twentieth century as The French had been for the previous, forced the western capitalist countries to pursue the welfare state, which ironically with the growth of production and mass consumerism, has provided the masses with the freedom of want for which the revolution was the sole purpose.

The period of which is under survey is short, the mere forty years between 1875 and 1914, short enough to be fitted into the active period of most men. It did witness an unprecedented rise in productivity, yet initially it was seen as an economic depression, the contradiction residing in the fact, according to Hobsbawm, that Capitalists are not interested in production per se, but in the pursuit of profit, and indeed margins for the latter were narrowing. The economical dominance of Britain was being undermined, primarily by the growth of the American and the German economies, the latter getting into high gear after the unification by Bismarck, still the British dominated the seas and hence worldwide trade.

The spectacular increase in productivity quickly overwhelming the slump and causing a sustained boom created a large middle-class and a very wealthy upper such fusing with the traditional aristocracy and in the process marginalizing it. The period, known as the 'belle époque' is quite familiar to most people by the large outputs of novels, plays and, (mostly lighter), operas that reflect it. It was a time of profusion and ostentatious consumerism, actually trickling down to a much larger segment of the population exemplified by say the introduction of the department store. Never before, and more to the point never after, was the life of the well-heeled middle class and upwards, more pleasant. Domestic chores taken care of by servants, plenty of leisure time and thus almost unlimited opportunities for cultural improvement and play. Travel was comfortable and easily available. Serious tourism, involving extended trips for months on end, an attractive option. But only for the select few, and thus unsullied by mass participation. No wonder that it produced and still produces such a nostalgia, not only among those who lived through it, but also those who only know it through reading, and reconstruction. It was also a time of extended peace, in which war, although an exotic possibility never constituted an imminent threat (just like

spectre of death is during most of our earthly tenure). So why could it not last for ever? Would it still have lasted had the First World War never come about due to diplomatic blunders? The thesis of Hobsbawm is that the period was doomed, as well as its more archaic empires like the Austro-Hungarian and the Russian, and would have come to grief, war or no war, and that the latter was more or less in the works, due to come in some form sooner or later, regardless of diplomatic blunders or the malignant ambitions of certain nations.

So why was it doomed? Hobsbawm is a Marxist, and the major tenet of Marxist orthodoxy is that capitalism is doomed, resting on internal contradictions as it is, and with it the thin layer of the class that benefits from it, is destined to be swept away by the great masses - the meek who are bound to inherit the earth, by the inevitable forces of history. But what hard evidence is there really for such a statement? Hard evidence is never the kind of currency that is available to the historian, all whose conclusions and propositions must remain highly tentative vulnerable to all kinds of onslaughts. But basically the age under review saw the widening of two kinds gulfs. The one existing between the rich and the poor in the countries of wealth and influence, the other, which was even more characteristic for the time, the splitting off of the wealthy industrialized world from the economically backward. The European discovery of the world stems from the early 16th century with the ruthless expropriation of the new world, almost total in the northern part, less so, but still dominatingly so in the south. With the great improvement of communication in the late 19th century as well as the vast availability of material resources the attitudes towards the rest of the world changed dramatically. While previously the margins of the world were sources of trade and the location of trading stations, (as is well-known the British presence in India was initiated by the purely commercial ventures of the British East-India company and only much later taken over by the British government), they now became legal prey to packs of wolves of nations. The remainder of the world was simply there to be partitioned off in a shameless scramble. The British with their navy and prior colonial footholds, of which the Indian subcontinent was the jewel of the imperial crown, had an obvious advantage. The French too in view of their long tradition still had an edge. The Russians were unique in having their colonies adjacent to their heartland, and in fact confusing the distinction¹. The Germans were latecomers, like wealthy collectors coming too late to the art-market when the real gems have already been squirrelled away at bargain rates, as were the Americans but, like the denotation reveals, they had the advantage of their secure domination of the entire new world, and like the Russians making their colonial conquests an integral part of their expanding country. Japan stood out as the only non-western contender, just having emerged from an isolated feudal past into a period of frantic modernization, energetically involved in creating its own eastern empire. What made this partition of the world, which not only involved unstructured territories like most of the dark continent of Africa, but also, not only potentially, the colonial imperiums of once great countries, like Spain and Portugal, and the grand empires of great antiquity, like the Persian and the Chinese, possible. What made this not only possible but also imperative was a sense of innate superiority coupled by excessive resources.

¹ The Polish journalist Kapucinsky has pointed out that the right way to look at the Soviet Union was as a country that had turned itself into its own colony

What were the sources of this superiority? Until say the 16th century Europe was arguably on no higher level than other classical imperial countries. It was vulnerable both nomadic forces, like the invading Mongols, and the Islamic ones represented by the Ottoman empire whose inroads into the southeast were significant until the failed siege of Vienna in the end of the 17th century, but remained a formidable military adversary throughout the 18th. But the Europeans did develop a science that was second to none (all the recent talk about ethno-science is rubbish, modern science, as opposed to proto-science, has only arisen once in the history of mankind) and which did not really come into its own until the 19th century (riding on the waves of industrialization rather than initially driving it). As to cultural superiority, this is clearly a much more contentious question, but as to forms of government and economic activity those clearly were better organised and in the latter case much more vigorous than in the ageing empires of the past. The most tangible superiority, that of military fire-power, is of course a consequence rather than a driving force. The question of what in the European (needless to say including its transatlantic settlements) civilization was truly superior and worth emulating, is interestingly illustrated by the Meiji restoration, in which an entire nation, with a long history and strong identity, deliberately set out to change itself in a purposeful way. Thus during the 19th century there was a deeply felt conviction that European civilization was superior to the rest, and the imperative to spread it did originate from the most benign of motives, namely to make its blessings the benefit also of the untutored masses. But with good-will comes a moral authority that legitimates an aggression that would not otherwise be sanctioned. While, or so we are being told, racism is a recent invention, it stems from the contempt that grows out of empathy evolving into patronizing; and came into its own around the Sepoy Mutiny in the middle of the century. The mere fact that a handful of western administrators were able to organize and lead literally millions of docile subjects ² clearly attributed to this sense of superiority.

Now this sense of superiority is still with us, although we are less brash about extolling it³. Although the Christian missionary project to a large extent has petered out, our enthusiasm to export the blessings of democracy, often coupled with the support of a market economic system, seems not to have abated, on the contrary taken on an added urgency. In fact one can argue that many of the old colonizers showed a greater appreciation of indigent cultures and customs, than modern day busibodies, one only has to point to the literay chronicler par excellence of the imperial venture - Rudyard Kipling. So in many ways the buildings of empire seem more than anything to be a manifestation of exuberant expansion, claiming possession of the planet, made possible by a growing excess of resources, improved communications being one key element. In addition to that there were undeniable economic exploitations, the most bizarre example being the case of the Belgian Congo⁴, as well as a scramble to realise grand ambitions. But was the motive really economical, as proposed by Lenin, and ingeniously suggested by Hobsbawm, as he at the same time acknowledges that the economic involvement in the colonies were rather

² In India the relative numbers may have been on the order of 1:10'000

³ The present American administration may be an exception

⁴ As everyone knows being run as a private enterprise by the Belgian King, and resulting in a drastic culling of the native population.

marginal, most of the trade being within the European continent itself or transatlantic. True, the colonies became suppliers of certain key raw materials, only available in the tropics like rubber and certain obscure but crucial metals, but increased technology tended to marginalize even that.

The collapse of the period into world-war remains unexplained, and thus eminently amendable to be fitted into various apocalyptic scenarios⁵. It was a period characterized by an almost unbridled optimism and trust in Progress. Too good to be true. Yet, in many ways it has continued throughout the cataclysms of two world wars, coming out rather stronger for the challenges, exhibiting a remarkable resiliency. Recall that Hobsbawm claims that its temporary collapse into mayhem and the scare exerted by the Russian Revolution refracted it critically into a more well-fare oriented state, thus sidestepping the historical necessities of revolution, bringing the masses into a consumer society thereby providing the blessings and freedoms only revolution were thought to bring.

February 10, 2005

⁵ Marxism obviously supplying one, as well as a more reactionary and pessimistic kind presented by Spengler