

**Title—The Age of Empire, 1875-1914**

**Author—E. J. Hobsbawm**

**Year—1987**

Categories: World History, British Empire, Economics, Class

Place: The World

Time: 1875-1914

Argument Synopsis:

This is the third book in a series focusing on different aspects of the long nineteenth century. Hobsbawm's book is focused on what he deems the 'age of empire' from 1875 until 1914. He argues that the culture of everyday life continues to be dominated by three innovations from this period. He identifies these as the advertising industry in its modern form, modern mass circulation of newspapers or periodicals, and the moving photograph or film. Hobsbawm characterizes the age of empire as an era of unparalleled peace in the Western world, which engendered an era of equally unparalleled world wars. For him, the central axis of the period was the triumph and transformation of capitalism in the historically specific forms of bourgeois society in its liberal version.

He draws a parallel between the centrality of Britain to the world economy and the general identification of the contemporary world with a nineteenth century liberal bourgeois society. The nineteenth century was the European era in the world's history, with Britain as its core. He argues that Britain remained committed to free trade during this period because it was the greatest exporter of industrial goods, of capital, of financial services, and of transport services. Although he makes a case for Europe's dominance during this period, he strives to do so without falling into the trap of Eurocentrism. His book aims to survey the moment in history when it became clear that the society and civilization created by and for the western liberal bourgeoisie represented just one phase in the early development of the modern industrial world.

Hobsbawm highlights 1914 as the end of the era of the bourgeoisie, claiming that the liberal world system and nineteenth century bourgeois society as the norm to which any kind of civilization expired both collapsed in 1914. He argues that after 1914 mass catastrophe became an integral and expected part of the civilized world, which on some level masked the continued advances of technology and the human capacity to produce. Writing in 1987, Hobsbawm posits that the danger of bolshevism dominates the history of the world since 1917. He views the division of the world between socialist countries and the rest to be intimately shaped by the age of empire. The age of empire witnessed the birth of what is still characteristic of the modern urban society of mass culture, i.e. press and film. He demonstrates how the proliferation of consumer goods, credit purchases, mass politics & media, and office work all began during the age of empire. Hobsbawm views history as a unified process, and his book succeeds in presenting the past as a unified process of revolutionary transformations of economic, political, and cultural institutions.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The liberal world system and nineteenth century bourgeois society as the norm to which any kind of civilization aspired both collapsed in 1914
- This was an era of unparalleled peace in the Western world, which engendered an era of equally unparalleled world wars
- Culture of everyday life is still dominated by three innovations from the age of empire: advertising industry, mass circulated newspapers, and moving film