Walking in the footsteps of Eric Hobsbawm: Space and place in intellectual biography

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Where do a thinker's ideas come from? This simple question has long defined the field of intellectual history. Answering it usually involves consideration of a person's published output, as well as their unpublished written work, lectures, interviews, correspondence, notebooks, manuscripts and marginal comments. In some cases, this list of materials extends to include a discussion of educational institutions and, where relevant, a person's involvement in politics. By contrast, a person's psychological universe—the spaces they inhabit or move through, the sensory and emotional universe around them or their familial environment—is usually relegated to the status of biographical embellishment. Intellectual historians will sometimes discuss the house in which a person was born or the impact of a divorce, but these are rarely the driving force behind an analysis of a person's ideas.

Some of this reticence has to do with a laudable desire on the part of intellectual historians to distance themselves from traditional biographical tropes. Narrative biographies, journalistic 'profiles' and screen biopics often emphasise a person's inner world. This can trivialise ideas and decisions, making them dependent on a particular interpersonal relationship or some aspect of a person's psychological makeup. Intellectual historians, most of whom care deeply about the structure and coherence of a person's ideas, want to take seriously their inner logic. For this, they need to separate the life of the mind from everyday life. Even the influential Cambridge School of political thought, which has provided much of the impetus for Anglo-American intellectual history's emphasis on 'texts in context', takes as its basic assumption that ideas are forged in dialogue with other ideas. The 'context' refers to an intellectual or political context.

But, as we know, ideas do not develop solely in relation to other ideas. They do so in relation to cultural, social or psychological contexts as well. Some intellectual historians have begun to take these seriously, for instance, in the recent attempt to produce a comprehensive, multi-volume 'cultural history of ideas'.[1] The problem with this is that the impact of a cultural context is hard to measure in general terms, without falling back on an ideational framework in which certain groups of thinkers

1 Stefanos Geroulanos, ed., *A Cultural History of Ideas in the Modern Age* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2023).

share a common set of intellectual experiences or outlooks and develop their ideas accordingly. Capturing the texture of a thinker's ideas—or what we might call, after the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, its 'thick description'—requires a microhistorical lens.[2] It is for this reason that a cultural history of ideas is especially suited to intellectual biography, which almost always takes as its object an individual or small group of thinkers. A close study of an individual provides the intellectual historian with an effective vantage point from which to assess the impact of cultural contexts on the development of ideas, arguments, texts and interventions. This can yield rich and sometimes unexpected insights.

I have chosen to focus on space and place. These terms each have very substantial historiographical and theoretical hinterlands, but they have little to no purchase in intellectual history. With the exception of a handful of scholars who have tried to write a 'spatial history' of ideas, we find very few references to space or place in intellectual history or intellectual biography.[3] There are intellectual biographies that take seriously the places in which thinkers found themselves and the spaces they moved through, such as Deborah Reed-Danahay's study of Pierre Bourdieu; Edward Baring's biography of the 'early Derrida'; or Michael Behrent's evocation of Michel Foucault's childhood in Poitiers, France.[4] There have even been more ambitious attempts to write what the anthropologist Michael Herzfeld called 'ethnographic biography', which he used to describe his book-length study of the Greek author Andreas Nenedakis.[5]

All of these approaches were a major influence on me when I first started to conceptualise an intellectual biography of Eric Hobsbawm.[6] I was drawn to the idea of producing an ethnography of ideas, in which I would be forced into the role of the participant-observer. I wanted—quite literally—to follow in Hobsbawm's footsteps, in the hope that seeing what he saw might help me to think what he thought. Today, however, I am a bit more sanguine about the possibilities and pitfalls of such an approach. I did go to some of the places Hobsbawm visited as part of my research, but I had entirely different reactions to him—and I also think a true 'ethnographic biography' is hard to complete in the absence of an interlocutor. It is no coincidence that Herzfeld's book was written alongside, and in conversation with, Nenedakis, who commented on the arguments as they were being elaborated.

2 Clifford Geertz, 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture', in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Basic Books, 1973), 3–30.

3 Laura C. Forster, 'The Paris Commune in London and the Spatial History of Ideas, 1871–1900', *The Historical Journal* 62, no. 4 (2019): 1021–44, doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X19000256.

4 Deborah Reed-Danahay, *Locating Bourdieu* (Indiana University Press, 2005); Michael C. Behrent, *Becoming Foucault: The Poitiers Years* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023), doi.org/10.9783/9781512825138; Edward Baring, *The Young Derrida and French Philosophy, 1945–1968* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511842085.

5 Michael Herzfeld, *Portrait of a Greek Imagination: An Ethnographic Biography of Andreas Nenedakis* (University of Chicago Press, 1997). See also Yves Winkin, 'Erving Goffman: What Is a Life? The Uneasy Making of an Intellectual Biography', in *Goffman and Social Organization*, ed. Greg Smith (Routledge, 1999), 19–41.

6 Emile Chabal, *The Age of Hobsbawm: The Life of a Revolutionary Historian* (Harvard University Press, 2026), doi.org/10.4159/9780674305397.

Nevertheless, I remain convinced that intellectual history—and especially intellectual biography—could do much more with space and place. In particular, I have found that a focus on space and place has helped me to emphasise two neglected themes in the history of ideas. The first is mobility. To talk about ideas in a particular space (the home, the seminar room, the public meeting, the conference hall) is also to talk about how those ideas came to inhabit those spaces—and how they moved between them. It is not enough to ask about origins—the famous question of where ideas come from. We also need to ask where ideas go, what happens to them when they move and how they move in the first place. Certainly, in the case of a highly mobile intellectual like Hobsbawm, his ideas were refashioned by movement (that is, they changed as he moved from university to university, or from country to country) and they were reinterpreted as they moved (that is, from him to his interlocutors and—sometimes—back again). His ideas were not stable, even when they were already in written form, and they became more unstable as they moved.

The second theme relates to what we might call the sensory history of ideas. This encompasses two interconnected elements. The first is the impact of particular sensory experiences on the elaboration of an idea. This can take the form of an external sensory process, such as the weather, or an internal sensory process, such as the side-effects of illness. These then open up fields of enquiry or highlight the importance of certain arguments. Closely related to this is the impact of particular sensory experiences on the expression and dissemination of ideas. This is perhaps best captured in the thrill many intellectuals feel when they are talking to a large and attentive audience, but it might equally relate to the places in which a person produces or discusses their work (office, living room, home study, library). In the case of Hobsbawm, the impact of these different sensory experiences is beyond doubt. He was an inveterate traveller, and we can see him elaborating ideas in real-time as he moved through certain spaces. We can also see him engaging with the landscape, climate and topography of the places he visited. Similarly, he was attentive to the way people looked, the cadences of their voice and their physical features, and these frequently found their way into his writings.

Taking these themes as a starting point, I offer here an analysis structured around three case studies: Hobsbawm's first encounter with Italy in the 1950s, the short period of research he undertook in the *sierra central* of Peru in 1971 and the house in north London in which he lived from 1972 until his death. Each of these has something different to say about the interaction between space, place and ideas. In Italy, the sheer beauty of the landscape and the joie de vivre of the people with whom he stayed durably shaped his interpretation of communism. During his short trip to Peru, he gained a renewed appreciation of the harsh realities of peasant life. And, in his family home, he built something akin to a salon, where people would mingle and mix, with good food and substantial conversation in plentiful supply. To be clear, I am not suggesting that the impact of these—sometimes liminal—spaces was greater than that of, say, the books he read, the people he met or the debates in which he

participated over the course of his long career.[7] Rather, we should think of space and place as influences that redirected or subtly modified these more explicitly intellectual engagements. By exploring how the smell of a freshly cooked meal, the intensity of Mediterranean sunlight or a long train journey contributed to Hobsbawm's intellectual universe, we can enrich our perspective on where his ideas came from and how they developed.

I. The aesthetics of communism: Italy in the 1950s

When Hobsbawm first visited Italy in 1951, shortly after finishing his PhD, it was a difficult period in his life. His first marriage was falling apart, and he was struggling with the usual problems of the early career academic: a lot of teaching, not enough time and a need to make a name for himself in the field. Although he had completed his PhD at King's College, Cambridge, and held a fellowship there from 1949 to 1955, his intellectual life largely revolved around London. His research involved long hours in the British Library or the London School of Economics Library, where he scoured trade union papers and picked apart the vast amount of archival material that existed on the nineteenth-century British working class. His first teaching job, a lectureship at Birkbeck from 1949, was also in London. Perhaps most importantly, most of his fellow communists lived there. Between 1946 and the mid-1950s, he met them regularly at long (and often intense) Communist Party Historians Group meetings to discuss fundamental historical questions and strategise about the next move in the so-called 'battle of ideas'.[8]

In later years, he had complex and sometimes contradictory memories of this period. On the one hand, he freely acknowledged the 'intellectual excitement, political passion and friendship' that came with his involvement in a close-knit group of party intellectuals. At the same time, his sensory recollections emphasised the 'physical austerity' that came with it:

> [Historians Group members] would make [their] way, normally at weekends, through what memory recalls as the dank, cold and slightly foggy morning streets of Clerkenwell to Marx House or to the upper room of the Garibaldi Restaurant, Laystall Street, armed with cyclostyled agendas, sheets of 'theses' or summary arguments … Saffron Hill, Farringdon Road and Clerkenwell Green in the first ten post-war years, were not a sybaritic or even a very welcome environment.[9]

7 I explore this straightforward intellectual history of Hobsbawm's ideas at some length in Chabal, *The Age of Hobsbawm*, especially chs 3, 4, 5 and 8.

8 Emile Chabal, 'Historians of the World Unite! Eric Hobsbawm and the Communist Party Historians Group, 1946–1956', *Revista Mundos do Trabalho* 10, no. 19 (2018): 71–82, doi.org/10.5007/1984-9222.2018v10n19p71.

9 Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Historians' Group of the Communist Party', in *Rebels and Their Causes: Essays in Honour of A.L. Morton*, ed. Maurice Cornforth (Lawrence & Wishart, 1978), 25.

It was certainly true that London (and, to lesser extent, Cambridge) in the late 1940s was not an especially comfortable environment. It was visibly scarred by the legacy of wartime damage, and most residents still lived in the shadow of the economic privations of rationing. But Hobsbawm's memories also tell us something about what it felt like to be a British communist at this time. To be a party comrade was not simply to fight against one's political enemies—the massed ranks of imperialists, conservatives and capitalists who threatened communism's fragile gains in Europe and elsewhere. It was also to fight against the elements. Shrugging off the cold and the damp was a political act, as was lugging huge stacks of papers across London on buses and in the tube.

In Hobsbawm's case, the challenges of being a communist in 1950s London were refracted through his teenage memories of being a communist in Berlin in the early 1930s. There, too, he remembered the ecstatic—orgasmic—joy of being part of a political community. But he never forgot the bitter cold of the Berlin winter.[10] Sometime in the 1940s or early 1950s, he wrote an unpublished short story about being a young communist in Berlin on the eve of Hitler's ascent to power. Significantly, the opening sentences were not about communism; they were about the sensory impact of the cold:

> I do not know about Chicago, but Berlin was a windy city in those days. The wind blew sleet through the wide spaces … [and] clogged the tramlines with soaked brown leaves. It used to blow through my blue mackintosh and make me clench my hands in the pockets … The wind blew across the lakes … making the water shiver.[11]

As in London, the backdrop to political commitment was a harsh physical environment. Whether it was the raw and freezing winds that swept across the flatlands of eastern Germany or the thick, 'pea-souper' fog for which London was famous, Hobsbawm's experiences of being a communist were tightly associated with physical austerity.[12]

Imagine, then, what it was like to arrive in Italy in the early 1950s. Despite its recent history of fascism, no-one could question the country's communist credentials. By the early 1950s, the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI) had become the largest, most dynamic and most successful European communist party outside the Eastern Bloc. It was both a formidable electoral machine and a cultural force intent on reshaping local communities. Neither the anaemic Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in the late 1940s, nor the German Kommunistiche Partei Deutschlands in the fractious early 1930s could compete with the PCI's status as a vehicle for popular

10 The reference to sex is one Hobsbawm himself made in his memoirs: 'Next to sex, the activity combining bodily experience and intense emotion to the highest degree is the participation in a mass demonstration at a time of great public exaltation'. See Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth Century Life* (Abacus, 2003), 73.

11 Untitled short story [Berlin], undated [probably 1940s–50s], Papers of Professor Eric Hobsbawm, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (henceforth Hobsbawm Papers), 937/4/3/4/1.

12 On Hobsbawm and fog, see Christine L. Corton, *London Fog: The Biography* (Harvard University Press, 2018), 261–2.

politics. For someone like Hobsbawm, whose political coordinates were those of the 'popular front' of the 1930s, the PCI offered a thrilling combination of genuine mass-based communism and limited political heterodoxy. Yet Italy offered more than simply another strategic vision of communism; it also provided a different sensory experience. Gone were the gloomy streets of London and the icy lakes of Berlin. In Italy, Hobsbawm discovered that communism could be accompanied by good food, beautiful architecture, arresting landscapes and the generosity of people who lived their lives under the Mediterranean sun.

Such an impression was no doubt augmented by the fact that he was fast-tracked into the highest echelons of the Italian intelligentsia. This was largely due to the economist Piero Sraffa, who had been teaching at Cambridge since 1927.[13] Sraffa was intimately acquainted with the left-wing intellectual scene in Italy at the time, and he shared his address book with Hobsbawm in advance of his first trip. By leaning on the contacts of an important man, Hobsbawm was catapulted straight into the Italian communist elite. These were neither the dour CPGB cadres of the 1950s, nor were they doctrinaire Soviet-style apparatchiks. Instead, they were elegant and well-spoken men and women, who were organically connected to a mass party and eager to welcome a curious British interlocutor. On his first visit, Hobsbawm was treated to the hospitality of such luminaries as the historian Delio Cantimori, as well as communist-affiliated institutions like the Fondazione Gramsci.[14] On subsequent trips, he used his contacts to travel across the country—especially through Calabria and Sicily—and he became familiar with a remarkable cross-section of the Italian left-wing intelligentsia. He met historians like Ernesto Ragioneri and Renato Zangeri, publishers like Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, young activists like Giorgio Napolitano and Bruno Trentin, and writers like Giorgio Amendola and Emilio Sereni.[15] All of these figures were influential, and many of them also had (or would later have) political careers as members of parliament or mayors.

His relationship with Italy deepened further in the 1960s. His second wife, Marlene, loved the country and had many friends there. Moreover, he was now a recognised figure whose writing began to appear in major communist-affiliated publications, including a regular current affairs column in the journal *Rinascita* from 1964 to 1970. So frequent were his publications in Italy that many readers did not realise his main job was as a university academic. The historian Lucio Sponza, who later studied at Birkbeck, recalled how he had read Hobsbawm's column in *Rinascita* assiduously as a student in Venice in the 1960s but only became aware of his academic writing when he saw *Industry and Empire* in a bookshop window display on a visit to London

13 The first recorded meeting between the two men was in February 1951. See 'The Cambridge Pocket Diary, 1950–1951', Trinity College Cambridge Archives, Sraffa E23.

14 Anna di Qual, 'Eric J. Hobsbawm tra marxismo britannico e comunismo italiano' (PhD thesis, Università degli Studi di Padova, 2017), 92.

15 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 352.

in 1968.[16] By the 1970s, the PCI was at the peak of its political and intellectual power, and Hobsbawm benefited from this prestige. He was called upon to edit an ambitious 'history of Marxism' for the Einaudi publishing house (the first volume of which was released in 1978), and, in 1975, he interviewed Napolitano—now the leader of the PCI—for a book that sold thousands of copies worldwide.[17]

I have written elsewhere about the intellectual history of Hobsbawm's textual interventions in Italy, the political debates with which he was involved and the academic networks he built.[18] But I would like to focus here on the centrality of space and place, both of which Hobsbawm recognised as vital parts of his Italian experience. When he reminisced about Italy in his memoirs in the early 2000s, he was self-aware enough to realise that, from the 1970s onwards, his interaction with the country largely involved 'public occasions', 'days with friends mostly in or around Rosario and Anna Rosa Villari's farmhouse in Tuscany', and 'academic conversations in places whose familiarity did not diminish their beauty'.[19] The reference to 'beauty' was not a throwaway remark. It was an acknowledgement that, with hindsight, what had stayed with him was as much Italy's distinct aesthetic as its intellectual and political life. Although in his memoirs he only recognised this from the 1970s onwards, I would argue that this aesthetic dimension was present from his very first trip onwards. To put it simply: he discovered a new aesthetic of communism in Italy that embraced rather than shunned sensual and sensory pleasures.

One way in which he was confronted with this new aesthetic of communism was in the form of personal encounters. Take, for instance, his meeting with the charismatic Rita Pisano in 1955. She was a well-known communist and women's organiser from the region around Cosenza, who later became the mayor of her hometown, Pedace, for more than 20 years. Among other things, Pisano was part of the Calabrian delegation to the Soviet-sponsored World Council of Peace in Rome in October 1949. During this visit, she caught the attention of Pablo Picasso, who was so taken with her that he spontaneously pulled out his pencil and paper over lunch to draw a portrait of the 23-year-old.[20] The drawing, which is now known under the title 'La jeune fille de Calabre' and later appeared on the cover of a 1959 book about Calabria, became a symbol of Calabrian dynamism and youth.[21] One suspects that Hobsbawm, too, was rather taken by Pisano. His brief notes on their meeting refer mostly to her political biography and introduction to Italian communism as a teenager, but there is one moment in their conversation where she seems to have playfully asked him

16 Lucio Sponza, 'Eric Hobsbawm. Un ricordo personale' in *storiamestre* (31 May 2013), storiamestre.it/2013/05/hobsbawmunricordo/.

17 Giorgio Napolitano and Eric Hobsbawm, *Napolitano: Intervista sul PCI, a cura di Eric J. Hobsbawm* (Laterza, 1975). See also Di Qual, 'Hobsbawm tra marxismo britannico e comunismo italiano', 294–9.

18 Chabal, *The Age of Hobsbawm*, especially chs 3 and 6.

19 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 359.

20 Antonello Trombadori, 'Zavattini, Picasso e noi nel '49', *La Repubblica*, 28 October 1989.

21 Vincenzo Padula and Carlo Muscetta, *Persone in Calabria* (Parenti, 1959). The portrait appears on the front cover.

whether she was prettier than her 14-year-old niece.[22] He did not record his answer to the question, but we do know that she was instrumental in introducing him to local farmers and, presumably, translating their *calabrese* dialect for him. This combination of striking beauty and formidable political experience must have left a mark on him.

Another example was the story Hobsbawm told about how he first became interested in the people who would become the subject of his book, *Primitive Rebels*, published in 1959. Although he had previously shown some interest in patterns of rebellion and protest during his doctoral studies, he claimed that what really stimulated his interest in the topic was a conversation—over dinner, no less—in Rome in 1951 with the director of the Fondazione Gramsci, Ambrogio Donini. The latter regaled him with tales of 'primitive' social movements like the Tuscan Lazarettists and southern sectarians.[23] Many of his later travels were driven by a desire to unearth stories about these sorts of characters across rural southern Italy. It was this that led him, in 1953, to meet Michele Sala, the colourful mayor of the Sicilian town of Piana degli Albanesi, which had a recent history of banditism, antifascist rebellion and communism. What eventually became the sixth chapter of *Primitive Rebels*—on Sicilian fasci and peasant communism—was largely the product of Sala's personal knowledge and connections.[24] He quite literally accompanied Hobsbawm wherever he went, offering advice, insights, insider gossip and—crucially—access to the mayoral car.[25] The human texture that made *Primitive Rebels* come to life and gave it a quasi-anthropological quality came from this kind of encounter.

Hobsbawm's exposure to the richer, more beautiful aesthetic of communism in Italy was enhanced by mobility. We do not have records of all of his travels in the 1950s, but we do have snippets of his travel notes and a few maps showing itineraries. We know that most of his visits to Italy were in the spring and summer. This ensured that the places he visited were sunny and warm, if not hot. We also know that, wherever he went, he talked to the people he met, quizzing them about their economic circumstances and political affiliation, as well as taking notes on their living conditions and physical appearance. For example, we have a record of him listening to jazz in the seaside town of Rodi Garganico, near Foggia, in 1957 (he was a jazz critic for the *New Statesman* at the time). Among other things, he remarked on the difference between the 'old-fashioned and glutinous' jazz played by the young people and the 'harsh and melancholy native music' of the region.[26] More generally,

22 'Rita P', undated [summer 1955], Hobsbawm Papers, 1215/5.

23 For the best account of the encounter with Donini, see di Qual, 'Hobsbawm tra marxismo britannico e comunismo italiano', 120–3. See also Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Praeger, 1963), i; Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 346.

24 'This fragmentary account of the movement in Piana is based largely on local information gathered in the town, thanks to the courtesy of the mayor Hon. Michele Sala, and on various references in newspapers and the secondary literature'. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, 101.

25 Incomplete draft of talk or article on Piana degli Albanesi and Spezzano Albanese, undated [probably c. 1959], Hobsbawm Papers, 937/4/2/3.

26 Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Cats in Italy', *New Statesman*, 28 September 1957.

as he moved through the hills and plains of southern Italy, he commented on what it felt like to navigate the sometimes hostile environment. The act of moving stimulated thoughts and reflections, which occasionally appeared in his more journalistic writing but were often confined to his notes.[27]

Still, it is clear that Italy was more than just a case study for his research on primitive rebellion. The experience of meeting people and travelling across the country transformed the way he wrote about his subject and the methodology he adopted. It was in Italy that he perfected his unique ad hoc, short-term approach to fieldwork, which he later used extensively in his travels across Latin America in the 1960s. It was also in Italy that he was able to rethink what communism looked and felt like. It offered him a place where he could enjoy the finer things in life alongside serious theoretical conversations about Marxism. Holding on to this vision of communism became even more important after the crisis of 1956, which was brought on by Khrushchev's 'secret speech' and the invasion of Hungary. Unlike many of his comrades, Hobsbawm chose to stay in the party after 1956, even though he echoed many of the criticisms as those who left. One of the ways he was able to justify this was by embracing more fully the PCI. The indigenous success of Italian communism offered him a legitimate reason for remaining a communist—and it was a place where his intellectual credentials were taken seriously. Yet again, the contrast with Britain was telling. In the late 1950s, he was treated poorly by the leadership of the CPGB, who suspected him of fraternising with his former comrades on the New Left. The constant accusations visibly upset him; he had, after all, shown unwavering loyalty to the party.[28] While he was ultimately able to smooth out his relations with the CPGB hierarchy, his relationship with British communism was permanently damaged. In Italy, on the other hand, no-one questioned his intellectual heterodoxy or his decision to stay in the party. Whether on a Mediterranean beach or at a lavish PCI banquet, he could be proud to be a communist.

II. Clear mountain air: Peasants in the Andes

When the historian Richard Evans was completing his official biography of Hobsbawm, Marlene Hobsbawm allowed him to reproduce several photographs from her personal collection. One of them was from a family trip to the Central Sierra of Peru in 1971. It features Hobsbawm sitting atop a stationary white pony in

27 The material in this paragraph is drawn from his field notebooks, Hobsbawm Papers, 937/3/4/2 and 1215/5.

28 A secret service wiretap reveals that, when he was told in 1959 that he would have to 'make up his mind' about whether to continue publishing in the non-party press or stay in the party, he was 'frightfully upset' and repeated that he 'had had many opportunities of leaving the Party if he had wanted to, but he did not, he wanted to stay in the Party'. Lascar Extract, 9 June 1959, Lascar Extract, 10 June 1959 and Lascar Extract, 19 June 1959, The National Archives, London, KV 2/3985.

a field, sporting a slightly embarrassed smile. With his straw-coloured Panama hat, he looks like a quintessential tourist who has been corralled into some sort of obligatory tour activity.[29]

In fact, Hobsbawm was there to work. He had a six-month sabbatical from Birkbeck, and he had been invited to spend it as a visiting fellow at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in Mexico City. At the end of his fellowship, he took the opportunity to travel to Colombia, Chile and Peru, all countries he had visited at least once since visiting continental Latin America for the first time in 1962. But, whereas his trips to Colombia and Chile took the form of journalistic fact-finding missions—he had been commissioned by the *New York Review of Books* to write essays on the FARC (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and the new Allende government in Chile—his trip to Peru had a more academic dimension. It arose thanks to an initiative launched by the young Peruvian historian Heraclio Bonilla, who had spent a year at Oxford in 1969 before returning to Peru and getting involved in the Instituto de Estudios Peruanos (IEP), founded in the early 1960s. After the military coup in Peru in 1968, Bonilla realised that the new regime's land reform project would transform—and, in some cases, lead to the destruction of—many of the old colonial haciendas. These contained extraordinarily rich archives, dating back to the early conquest period. Rather than let these archives be destroyed, Bonilla decided to launch what can best be described as a rescue operation. He tried to cobble together some money, and he enlisted the help of foreign academics to raise awareness of the value of the documents. The two foreign academics who accepted his invitation were Hobsbawm and the Spanish economist Joan Martínez Alier.[30]

Bonilla did the bulk of the work, but Martínez Alier and, to a lesser extent, Hobsbawm played a crucial role in unearthing the documents. The three researchers focused their attention on the Ganadera del Centro, a company that owned a network of haciendas that was later turned into the nationalised SAIS Cahuide cooperative. In each hacienda, they searched desk drawers and cupboards; in many cases, large numbers of documents would tumble out. Some of these were marked 'confidential', often concerning peasant and indigenous mobilisation in the late 1940s. There were also records of court disputes and local police reports, some of which were 400 years old.[31] The thrill of discovery was amplified by the value of the material for historical scholarship on rural Peru.

Hobsbawm was not a historian of Latin America, but he had been interested in Peruvian peasants ever since his first visit in 1962. At the time, he had done some fairly superficial research into the uprisings and protests in the La Convención

29 'Eric in the Peruvian Sierra, 1971. Courtesy of Marlene Hobsbawm', in Richard Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History* (Little, Brown, 2019), plate section two.

30 Marcos Cueto, 'La historia de la historia en el Instituto de Estudios Peruanos: los ciclos de las revoluciones historiográphicas' in *50 años pensando el Perú: una reflexión crítica. El Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 1964-2014*, ed. Martín Tanaka (Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 2014), 151–3.

31 Joan Martínez Alier, interview by author, 8 May 2016.

region of Peru near Cusco. He had travelled there for a few days to speak to local people. He visited the Cusco Federación de Campesinos (Peasants' Federation) and Federación de Trabajadores (Workers' Federation), making extensive notes on the way people looked and sounded. He attended a meeting of the carpenters' union at the Federación de Trabajadores and took the opportunity to quiz some of the attendees on what they thought of peasant politics and the peasant leader, Hugo Blanco (Hobsbawm's notes suggest that he sometimes struggled to make himself understood, despite his self-consciously 'Socratic' approach to questions).[32] Upon his return to the United Kingdom, he organised his thoughts into a series of conference papers, and, ultimately, an influential article on 'neo-feudalism' in La Convención, which appeared in the very first issue of the newly founded British journal, the *Journal of Latin American Studies*.[33] No wonder, then, that he jumped at the chance of getting involved with research on Peruvian peasants again in 1971.

Hobsbawm only spent a few weeks in Peru, but all the evidence suggests that he thoroughly enjoyed his total immersion. He took notes on the files he looked at, and he interviewed local officials about the recent history of the haciendas he visited.[34] From a purely academic perspective, the material he gathered and the additional research done by those attached to the project directly contributed to the publication of his well-known article on peasant land invasions in the journal *Past & Present* in 1974.[35] Hobsbawm's participation was also important for Bonilla and the IEP. Over time, the collected documents formed the basis of a huge 'Archivo Agrario', initially deposited at the IEP and eventually transferred to the Peruvian national archives. At least a dozen PhD theses and books were published using material from the archives, which gave a huge push to the study of social and economic history in Peru.[36]

As in Italy, though, it was not simply the intellectual aspects of his visit that left a lasting impression. He was deeply moved by the struggles of peasants in these small, windswept communities, perched high up in the Andean mountains, sometimes at altitudes of well over 4,000 metres. In one of the more lyrical passages in his memoirs, he tried to sum up his relationship to Latin America. He quoted two lines from Pablo Neruda's famous poem *Canto General* and then explained what it evoked for him:

> I know what the poet [Pablo Neruda] wanted to say and the big-chested, coca-chewing, brown, quiet men and women whom he had in mind, who scrabbled a living in the thin air of the Andean high country where it is harder

32 Notebook, Hobsbawm Papers, 937/3/1/5/5.

33 E. J. E. Hobsbawm, 'A Case of Neo-Feudalism: La Convención, Peru', *Journal of Latin American Studies* 1, no. 1 (1969): 31–50. On Hobsbawm's role in the development of Latin American studies in the United Kingdom, see Rory M. Miller, 'Academic Entrepreneurs, Public Policy, and the Growth of Latin American Studies in Britain during the Cold War', *Latin American Perspectives* 45, no. 4 (2018): 46–68, doi.org/10.1177/0094582X18775461.

34 Notebook, Hobsbawm Papers, 937/3/1/6/5.

35 E. J. Hobsbawm, 'Peasant Land Occupations', *Past & Present* 62, no. 1 (1974): 120–52.

36 Cueto, 'La historia de la historia en el Instituto de Estudios Peruanos', 152–5.

> to be a human being than almost anywhere else between Arctic and Antarctic. When I think of Latin America these are the people that come into my mind. Not only the poet but the historian should give them their due.[37]

That his entire image of the Latin American continent should have been defined by the landscapes of the Andean *altiplano* and the physical characteristics of its inhabitants speaks volumes about the importance of space and place to his ideas.

This focus on people and landscapes was the cumulative consequence of his travels in the Andean region in the period 1962–71. In 1962, when he was investigating Hugo Blanco in the La Convención region, he took detailed notes about the people he saw in the city of Cusco. He commented on their 'hats' and 'coloured ponchos, now discoloured to a dim brown'; he noted their 'flatfooted' gait and the fact that they usually walked 'barefoot or in sandals, bent over [with] loads' across the 'high pasture scenery'.[38] From Cusco, he travelled to the Inca ruins of Machu Picchu and then across the *altiplano* into Bolivia. It was at Machu Picchu that he claims to have read Neruda's 'Canto General', which probably explains why the poem made such an impression.[39] The power of the text was amplified by the majesty of the 'savage-looking' valleys, and the 'red lilies … wild begonias, wild strawberries, and wild orchids'.[40] Upon arrival in Bolivia, he met with United Nations Development Programme officials.[41] His discussions with them brought home the sheer poverty of the region. When combined with the obvious revolutionary potential he had identified in a disgruntled indigenous peasantry, it gave his research topic on 'primitive rebellion' new urgency.

It was much the same story in the Central Sierra in 1971. Because he travelled to Peru with his wife, Marlene, and his two young children, the trip had a slightly different complexion. His children went to play with those of a fellow British anthropologist, also based in the area, and he even took Marlene with him up to one of the recently modernised and nationalised haciendas. He was, she recalled, 'in his element … he was doing very much what he wanted'.[42] As in 1962, he was not fazed by the crazy taxi drivers or the long bus rides with chickens. They were an integral part of his experience. Nor was he put off by the complex nature of the archival work itself, which involved physically retrieving materials from the haciendas. On the contrary, the tactile dimension of this research found its way into his analysis. In his article on peasant land invasions, he commented on the importance of real papers for peasant communities:

37 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 384–5.
38 Notebook, Hobsbawm Papers, 937/3/1/5/5.
39 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 384.
40 Notebook, Hobsbawm Papers, 937/3/1/5/5.
41 Notebook, Hobsbawm Papers, 937/3/1/5/5. See also Margaret Joan Anstee, *Never Learn to Type: A Woman at the United Nations* (John Wiley, 2003), 184–7.
42 Marlene Hobsbawm, *Meet Me in Buenos Aires: A Memoir* (Muswell Press, 2019), 95.

> The entrenched legalism of peasant land invasions is a fact which both the student and the agitator neglect at their peril. To possess *papelitos* ('little pieces of paper') is very important for a Latin-American peasant community. Whether real or forged they are cherished, preserved, hidden from possible robbers, because to lose them would in some way affect their rights, though one can hardly say that it would weaken their sense that they exist.[43]

He also emphasised the importance of geography in the article. In his discussion of Huasicancha, a small village whose inhabitants were known for their active pursuit and occupation of hacienda lands from the 1930s onwards, he talked precisely about the topography of the area and stressed how local people had passed on the memory of land ownership through generations. Would he have made the same point had he not visited Huasicancha? Would he have written about 'papelitos' had he not pulled them out of desk drawers himself? It is certainly possible—all he would have needed to do was study a map or ask some of the Peruvian researchers who were much more familiar with the region than him. But the fact that he felt obliged to incorporate these insights into his article at all shows how his sensory experiences of research and mobility found their way into his work.

The case of Peru also demonstrates how an absence of personal engagement with space and place could gradually cause him to disconnect from a particular subfield. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, he was a well-known foreign intellectual in Peru. The lectures he gave were very well attended, and he often found himself under attack from young Maoists who objected to his orthodox communist views. When, at the peak of his notoriety in 1971, he wrote an influential essay in the *New York Review of Books* cautiously praising the economic reforms of the Velasco regime, he was sternly rebuked by left-wing Peruvian intellectuals who could not understand his complicity—real or imagined—with a military government.[44] From this point onwards, his relationship with Peru started to atrophy. He stopped travelling there, and he wrote nothing more about Peruvian or Latin American peasants. Some of this was due to his well-documented intellectual restlessness; he rarely wrote or researched a single topic for more than 10 or 15 years before moving on to something different. By the mid-1970s, his interest in Peru was mostly exhausted.

At the same time, he was hampered by his distance from Peru. Unlike in Italy, where the sensory pleasures of the Tuscan sunshine continued long after his initial exploratory fieldwork of the 1950s and 1960s had come to an end, he lost touch with the Peruvian Andes. This became obvious in his cursory treatment of the civil war that tore through the country in the 1980s. As it happens, the region around Huancayo in which Hobsbawm, Martínez Alier and Bonilla had done much of their archival work became one of the epicentres of the Maoist-inspired Shining Path insurgency.

43 Hobsbawm, 'Peasant Land Occupations', 124.

44 Eric Hobsbawm, 'Peru: The Peculiar Revolution', *New York Review of Books*, 16 December 1971; Aníbal Quijano, 'Perú. Imperialismo y capitalismo de Estado', *Sociedad y Política* 1, no. 1 (1972): 5–18.

The haciendas they had visited were burnt to the ground, and many people fled to larger cities to escape from the brutality of the insurgents. Huasicancha today is a completely different place to the one Hobsbawm described in 1971; it is empty and silent.[45] Of course, Hobsbawm had always dismissed the ultra-left posturing of Maoist groups as, at best, completely pointless and, at worst, murderously ineffective. But his inability to understand and empathise with the worldview of those who led and supported movements like Shining Path attests to a wider and more fundamental inability to grapple with the changing realities of Peru in the 1980s and 1990s. This, I would argue, was because he lost touch with what Peru looked and felt like. As a result, he could not formulate an adequate theory to explain what was going on. For someone who relied so much on sensory stimuli, human interaction and the thrill of moving through an unfamiliar environment for his insights, his absence from Peru had a deleterious effect.

III. The Hobsbawm salon: The house on Nassington Road

I visited the Hobsbawm household at 10 Nassington Road only once, in October 2014. I had been invited for tea by Marlene. She received me graciously in the front room, along with another friend. She pointed out the panoply of Indian artefacts on display—'Eric loved India!'—and she asked me who I was. I explained that I was a young historian interested in writing an intellectual biography of her husband, and she wished me well. I remember being very intimidated at the thought of sitting on the same sofa that so many other eminent guests had sat on. By setting foot in the Hobsbawm household, I felt as if I was somehow connected physically to my research subject.

Shortly afterwards, Marlene moved out of the house for good. Her departure marked the end of an era. She had moved in—with Eric—in 1972, shortly after their return from Latin America. They remained in the same house until he died. Set up as a quintessential bourgeois family home, it was the place where the middle-aged Hobsbawm finally found personal stability at the age of 55. But it was also a veritable meeting point for the vast network of academics, activists and intellectuals with whom he was associated. It quickly became what some described as 'north London's most distinctive Central European salon', and a self-styled space for the confrontation of ideas.[46] Looking back in her own memoirs, Marlene was clear about the bourgeois aspirations they had when they moved in:

45 I am enormously grateful to Pedro Cano Hinostroza who, in May 2018, accompanied me to some of the remains of the haciendas that Hobsbawm visited and explained to me, in great detail, the workings of the cooperatives.
46 Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm*, 412.

> In the seventies, dinner parties were the norm, usually eight to ten at the table. Cookery books, especially Elizabeth David, were all the rage. I spent a lot of the time on the telephone, organising who would fit well together … Eric would have liked the dinners to take place once a month, but then he only saw to the wine …
>
> At our dinner table, we wanted to talk without noise or muzak: conversation is all. If the ambiance is right—informal, casual—then people are relaxed enough for freer talk … In any case, there was much chatter among the chattering classes on whatever was current—I liked it best when one conversation was happening around the table. The food was as *casalingo* as possible. No posh things *en gelée* or shaped food en cocotte.[47]

This desire to create a very specific aesthetic and sensory palette—serious, tasty, homely and safe—was a product of the Hobsbawms' shared central European and British sociability. It also reflected forms of sociability associated with the intellectual left and north London's substantial Jewish community, where people would gather 'to eat and talk into the night', while discussing a whole range of political and intellectual matters, from Marx to the politics of the British Labour Party.[48]

It goes without saying that, in almost all cases, the model of dinner party sociability rested on a gendered division of labour. The hours Marlene spent planning meals, organising invitations, cooking food, and ensuring everyone was properly wined and dined were not ephemeral to the real business of 'chatter'; they were the foundation on which it rested. For Hobsbawm, the mere ability to extend an invitation and know that this would be honoured with proper hospitality was central to the way he socialised from the 1970s onwards. In the interviews I did for my book, I was given many examples of colleagues or students who were unexpectedly invited to dine at the Hobsbawm household. This served two crucial functions. First, it allowed Hobsbawm to keep in touch with the latest ideas, gossip and information. In a time before the internet, personal contact was a key means of information transfer about parts of the world to which he did not have easy access. On the occasions when Hobsbawm could not himself move to where new ideas were—to another country or another university—he found a way to bring them to him.

Second, dinner parties were a vehicle for his intellectual entrepreneurship. Right from the start of his career in the late 1940s, Hobsbawm showed himself to be extremely adept at building networks of academics on which he could draw for help, advice, funding, travel or ideas about publication. By the 1970s, he was an established name, with a substantial network of interlocutors in Europe, India, North America and Latin America, but his Nassington Road dinner parties allowed him to renew old

47 M. Hobsbawm, *Meet Me in Buenos Aires*, 100–1.

48 This description is taken from Sasha Abramsky, *The House of Twenty Thousand Books* (Halban, 2014), 198–202. He is describing his intellectual gatherings around his father, Chimen Abramsky, in the 1950s. For other parallel examples of this north London Jewish intellectual milieu, see, for example, the autobiographical reflections of Tony Judt or Mark Mazower.

acquaintances and put younger people in touch with established names. They also ensured that his inner circle—primarily made up of close family friends—did not become stale. There was always someone new at the table to give the conversation added spice. As his daughter Julia remembered: 'Christmas in the 1970s was always shared with global academics who in my mother's words had "nowhere else to go until the British Museum reopens"'.[49]

The Hobsbawms' efforts were rewarded in the form of near-universal acclaim for their hospitality. So central was the dinner party to Hobsbawm's image that it featured in his *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry, written by Martin Jacques, the former editor of the communist magazine *Marxism Today*:

> The Hobsbawms were great entertainers at their home in Nassington Road, Hampstead. Marlene was a wonderful host and Hobsbawm was highly convivial and stimulating company. Dinner there was enormously enjoyable and uplifting: there was never a dull moment, and ideas, stimulation, not to mention laughter, filled the air. In Hobsbawm's company, people felt that they were at the centre of the universe, which, in a sense of course, they were. Their social circle spread far and wide, reaching into the most unlikely quarters.[50]

This was echoed in obituaries of him when he died in 2012, some of which elevated Nassington Road into a veritable *lieu de mémoire* of the twentieth-century left. As the historian and Labour politician, Tristram Hunt, put it:

> To enter the Nassington Road drawing room for a conversation with Hobsbawm was to be transported back to the great ideological struggles of the extreme 20th century. Here was where ideas mattered, history had a purpose, and politics was important.[51]

We might question this kind of grandiose mythologisation, but there is no doubt that, as time went on, the Hobsbawm house became an important meeting point for London's intellectual and artistic elite. In the 1980s and 1990s, the size of the gatherings increased, and Marlene admitted that they sometimes ordered outside catering as a way of lightening the load on her.[52] Friends who knew them well saw them as consummate hosts with 'thousands' of acquaintances.[53] The dinner party at the Hobsbawms soon became an institution.

49 Julia Hobsbawm, 'Remembering Dad', *Financial Times*, 19 April 2013, www.ft.com/content/0dbd14de-a7c0-11e2-9fbe-00144feabdc0.

50 Martin Jacques, 'Hobsbawm, Eric John Ernest (1917–2012), Historian', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2016), doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/105680.

51 Tristram Hunt, 'Eric Hobsbawm Brought to Life Lost Voices and Placed Reality Centre Stage', *Guardian*, 1 October 2012, www.theguardian.com/books/2012/oct/01/eric-hobsbawm-history-lost-voices.

52 M. Hobsbawm, *Meet Me in Buenos Aires*, 101.

53 Gaia Servadio, interview by author, 30 October 2015.

Still, if the significance of the dinner party for Hobsbawm is clear enough, the question remains as to what impact it had—if any—on the development of his ideas. In the case of Italy and the Peruvian Andes, the links are fairly obvious in the characters who populated his texts, the topics he chose to write about and the way he chose to write about them. But it is much harder to draw a direct line between several decades of social encounters at home and a specific idea, argument or debate. It is better, I think, to treat the dinner party—and the house on Nassington Road more generally—as an emotional and social infrastructure that facilitated the movement of ideas. For a start, it was a safe space, in which Hobsbawm could stimulate exchange and discussion on his own terms. As a fiercely independent thinker who was also a loyal communist, he had exercised considerable self-control in his early years. In the 1950s, it had been important to toe the party line in public, even if one disagreed with it in private. In this turbulent period, when his first marriage was coming apart and international communism was itself riven with disagreements, he did not have a stable home. But his second marriage in 1962, and Marlene's desire to settle down, gave him both emotional and intellectual stability. Rather than turn inwards towards his family, he took advantage of this to sustain his intellectual universe through the dinner party.

Nassington Road also became a place where people talked. Much has been said about the fetishisation of text by the twentieth-century left—from interminable articles in radical student newspapers to the astonishing organisational paper trail left behind by European communist parties—but the world of orality was no less important.[54] Hobsbawm himself was deeply involved in cultures of informal learning as a student. He organised and attended debating societies, reading groups, and Marxist study groups.[55] The Communist Party Historians Group was also discussion-based. And, as we have already seen, he loved to talk to people on his travels, usually as a way of interrogating them about something he was interested in. The dinner party was an extension of these earlier forms of intellectual sociability. The act of talking was itself a way of generating new ideas. Much like the tradition of *adda* in Bengal, which is famously associated with coffee shops, the conversations Hobsbawm wanted to initiate were dependent on the intimate space of the home.[56] Indeed, the simple sensory experience of hearing people speak made him feel comfortable. Although there were many things about which he had felt insecure since he was a child, talking was not one of them. When there was a conversation happening, he knew what to do. As the Indian historian Romila Thapar remarked in 2018: 'I've seen him sit with

54 I am grateful to Rory Scothorne for helping me think more about print cultures and the left. Rory Scothorne, 'Radical Left and the Scottish Nation: Print-Cultures of Left-Wing Nationalism, 1967–1983', University of Edinburgh, 2021, era.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/38574. See also Ben Mercer, 'The Paperback Revolution: Mass-Circulation Books and the Cultural Origins of 1968 in Western Europe', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 72, no. 4 (2011): 613–36, doi.org/10.1353/jhi.2011.0032.

55 Chabal, *The Age of Hobsbawm*, ch. 2.

56 Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Adda, Calcutta: Dwelling in Modernity', *Public Culture* 11, no. 1 (1999): 109–45, doi.org/10.1215/08992363-11-1-109.

Indian Marxist historians, asking questions, and making linkages.'[57] Nowhere was it easier to make imaginative 'linkages' than in his own home, surrounded by chatty people, with the aromas of good food coming from the kitchen.

Lastly, the impact of the Nassington Road salon on his ideas can be measured in terms of his geographical orientations. From the mid-1950s until the mid-1970s, Hobsbawm limited his commentary on British politics. His focus lay elsewhere—in Italy and beyond—and in his academic work. This began to change in the late 1970s, first in his attempt to engage the young left-wing thinker Tom Nairn on the question of nationalism, and then, more successfully, through his famous lecture on the British labour movement entitled 'The Forward March of Labour Halted' (1978).[58] The latter became one of the signature strategic interventions on the British left in the 1980s, as the Labour Party struggled to find a new orientation in the Thatcher years.[59] After that, he remained an influential Labour-adjacent intellectual well into the 2000s, when he was often accused, rather unjustly, of having been the handmaiden of Tony Blair's New Labour.[60]

While there is no mechanical correlation between his greater notoriety in Britain and his move to Nassington Road, his new home did provide him with an excellent opportunity to install himself as a fixture on the British left. By this time, he had already gained plenty of experience in how to run a successful salon—and not just in Jewish north London. On his visits to Brazil in the 1970s, he frequented the house of the industrialist and publisher Fernando Gasparian, who regularly hosted the brightest intellectuals and artists in Rio.[61] Back in London, he and Marlene attended evening 'at homes' hosted by the architect Martin Frishman, who regularly invited a glittering array of composers, visual artists, and writers to dine with him and argue late into the night.[62] With such templates in mind, Hobsbawm set about creating a similar environment at his own dinner parties. Even the simple fact of journalists being invited to interview him at his home (or in his garden) reinforced the sense that Nassington Road was a place where important intellectual activities were taking place. Unlike many of his contemporaries, who preferred to separate their home life from their public persona, he actively sought to blur this boundary by inviting people to dine with him and Marlene. As he got into his 70s and 80s—and was less able to travel—the home became a place where he could remain connected to the outside world. Surrounded by his books, his letters, his old friends and his latest acquaintances, he could travel in his mind, without leaving north London.

57 Romila Thapar, interview by author, 29 January 2018.

58 Eric Hobsbawm, 'Some Reflections on "The Break-up of Britain"', *New Left Review* I, no. 105 (1977): 3–23, doi.org/10.64590/ryo; Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Forward March of Labour Halted', *Marxism Today*, September 1978, 279–86.

59 Colm Murphy, *Futures of Socialism: 'Modernisation', the Labour Party, and the British Left, 1973–1997* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), doi.org/10.1017/9781009278829.

60 For example, Herbert Pimlott, 'From "Old Left" to "New Labour"? Eric Hobsbawm and the Rhetoric of "Realistic Marxism"', *Labour/Le Travail* 56 (2005): 175–97.

61 Helena Gasparian, interview by author, 12 April 2018.

62 M. Hobsbawm, *Meet Me in Buenos Aires*, 106–7.

Conclusion: Towards a theory of space and place in intellectual biography

Writing an intellectual biography that takes seriously space and place is not an easy task. There is the constant risk of trivialising how ideas develop, or misunderstanding the relationship between a specific space or place and a specific idea. Through the three case studies I have discussed here, I have tried to show how, in the case of Hobsbawm, space and place had an important effect on the way he imagined ideas and the way he presented them. But it might be helpful to go one step further and offer a more general consideration of how my approach might add something to the way we do intellectual biography.

I would like to highlight three potential benefits. First, a consideration of space and place can help to explain the *intensification* of certain ideas. I mean this in the broadest sense, as a process by which an idea or argument is made to seem more urgent, more prescient or more real. If a thinker has in mind a tangible space or place when composing a text, this will almost certainly result in that text having greater intensity, merely by virtue of the sensory memories associated with it. Second, my approach gives more weight to the *ephemeral*. The desire to search for coherence and continuity is very strong among intellectual historians, but giving adequate attention to space and place allows us to account for how seemingly peripheral experiences can redirect a thinker's intellectual orientation. We need to find a way to incorporate a hedonistic summer, a house move or an invigorating mountain walk into a person's intellectual universe. While these liminal places usually have little more than a fleeting impact on a person, they can reshape ideas and arguments in unexpected—and long-lasting—ways.

Finally, my approach draws attention to the *embodied nature of ideas*. In contrast to the Cartesian notion of an independent mind, which still tacitly or explicitly underpins a lot of intellectual history, a focus on space and place makes us think about the impact that a thinker's body has on their ideas. This is most commonly considered in relation to serious illness or childbirth, both of which clearly have a profound effect on a person's worldview. But an embodied experience does not need to be of this magnitude to be analytically meaningful. The feeling of walking through the thin air of the Andes or the vivid memories of intense Mediterranean sunshine can be just as important. Giving these embodied experiences their due ensures that we do not divorce ideas from the spaces and places in which they were elaborated, nor from the people who engaged with them, and this applies even to those thinkers who were not as cosmopolitan or well-travelled as Hobsbawm.

This text is taken from *Australian Journal of Biography and History: No. 12, 2026*, published 2026 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/AJBH.12.2026.06