This summer I spent a little under six weeks in the UK doing research for my history thesis. Rather than going out onto the field, I went into the archive. In London, I visited the London School of Economics Library, which holds the papers of the philosopher and social anthropologist Ernest Gellner. In Coventry, I visited the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick, where the papers of the historian Eric Hobsbawm are kept. Although hailing from different disciplinary backgrounds, both Gellner and Hobsbawm are considered major figures in contemporary academic study of nationalism, having developed “modernist” theories that trace the rise of nationalism back to the advent of capitalism and the process of industrialization, which create novel political, social, and economic conditions under which ethnic groups could rally for a sovereign state. Part of my research aims to find out which intellectual and political contexts of mid- to late-twentieth century Britain help account for the rise of these theoretical approaches. Another part attends to how these specific scholars developed their views of nationalism over time, for which end archival research came to play an important role.

This is not my first time traveling to the UK. Two years previously, I had been there on a summer study abroad program. This experience made settling down relatively painless and left me with ample time to start research. I spent the first three weeks with Gellner’s papers, going to the library every weekday and wading through boxes of collected manuscripts, drafts, letters, and typed notes. At the LSE library archive there are three times of the day (the “fetches”) when new documents can be ordered and retrieved, and I came to structure my research days around them. The library staff was extremely patient and helpful with my inordinate number of requests. I ended up collecting a number of interesting and useful documents, mostly correspondence and manuscripts, and probably a lot more that are intriguing but will not fit easily in the final project. There was one unexpected drawback: Gellner’s handwriting was virtually illegible to me (and it seems, to many of his contemporaries as well), which rendered some of his kept diaries and field notebooks relatively inaccessible. Fortunately, those materials concerned subjects less relevant to my research topic.

My experience researching the Hobsbawm papers in Coventry was rather different. This collection had been opened to researchers without special permission fairly recently – in fact, a few weeks before I left for the UK. I was therefore quite fortunate to have been able to gain access to it. Due to different rules (no time limits to fetches) and more subject-focused cataloguing, I was able to make it through the prospective materials more efficiently. That this was possible is due in large part to the work of the archival staff, who had not only meticulously catalogued the materials but also always delivered my requests promptly. What emerged from the papers of the two scholars whose papers I examined were not only two people with different ideas and convictions, but also interestingly divergent working styles. Gellner, the philosophically inclined social scientist, tended to work at broad levels of generalization, traversing a large number of humanistic and social-scientific fields and recording his thoughts and ideas in pithy aphorisms, which he reworked and recombined in a kaleidoscopic manner. Hobsbawm, on the other hand, left behind an abundance of carefully kept and paginated notes of his reading materials. As behooves a social historian, he also kept records of pages and pages of statistics (for instance, on language use in Europe), which one
would be hard-pressed to find among the papers of Gellner. Hobsbawm’s penmanship was also considerably better, which makes tracing his ideas through his research notes a somewhat less quixotic task in comparison.

It was also in the Hobsbawm archive that I had one of the more interesting moments of the trip, which helped me better appreciate the material aspect of historical research. Among Hobsbawm’s collected notes on nationalism was the discussion protocol of a series of lectures he gave on the subject in 1985, which formed the essence of what would later on become his main book on the subject. The minutes were kept by Hobsbawm himself. When I found it, I knew this document was important, but I had to find a way to evaluate how conducive to my project it would be. However, much of it was in Hobsbawm’s handwriting on blank sheets of papers with almost no pagination. There were four lectures, and the pages for most of their discussions were out of order and mixed up, although they seemed to have been all in one place with none missing. Thus, even before evaluating how useful the document would be, I had to figure out how it should be arranged, how the discussion for each lecture goes and where one ends and another begins. This involved more than just reading the content, for it is more difficult to divine the flow of conversation from shorthand notes than full transcripts. What in the end helped was paying attention to minutiae such as whether the writer tended to reach the end of a page before turning on the next, whether he took down the names of interlocutors in lower-case or all-caps on any given day/lecture, or whether some pages – which seem to have been ripped from a glued-spine notebook – cohere more than others. All of this sounds much more mundane than actually attending to ideas on paper, but it shows me, as does the trip more broadly, a broader meaning of the class of objects called “primary sources.”