E. H. Carr
What is History?

MODERN CLASSICS

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PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS

WHAT IS HISTORY?

Edward Hallett Carr was born in 1892. He joined the Foreign Office in 1916 and worked there in many roles until 1936 when he became Woodrow Wilson Professor of International Politics at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth. After the war he became a Fellow of Balliol College, Oxford and then of Trinity College, Cambridge. His major work was the fourteen-volume *A History of Soviet Russia* (published 1950–78). *What is History?* is based on his Trevelyan Lectures, delivered in 1961. He died in 1982.

‘I often think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention.’

Catherine Morland on History (*Northanger Abbey*, ch. xiv)

Preface to the Second Edition

When in 1960 I completed the first draft of my six lectures, *What is History?*, the western world was still reeling from the blows of two world wars and two major revolutions, the Russian and the Chinese. The Victorian age of innocent self-confidence and automatic belief in progress lay far behind. The world was a disturbed, even menacing, place. Nevertheless signs had begun to accumulate that we were beginning to emerge from some of our troubles. The world economic crisis, widely predicted as a sequel to the war, had not occurred. We had quietly dissolved the British Empire, almost without noticing it. The crisis of Hungary and Suez had been surmounted, or lived down. De-Stalinization in the USSR, and de-McCarthyization in the USA, were making laudable progress. Germany and Japan had recovered rapidly from the total ruin of 1945, and were making spectacular economic advances. France under De Gaulle was renewing her strength. In the United States the Eisenhower blight was ending; the Kennedy era of hope was about to dawn. Black spots – South Africa, Ireland, Vietnam – could still be kept at arm's length. Stock exchanges round the world were booming.

These conditions provided, at any rate, a superficial justification for the expression of optimism and belief in the future with which I ended my lectures in 1961. The succeeding twenty years frustrated these hopes and this

complacency. The cold war has been resumed with redoubled intensity, bringing with it the threat of nuclear extinction. The delayed economic crisis has set in with a vengeance, ravaging the industrial countries and spreading the cancer of unemployment throughout western society. Scarcely a country is now free from the antagonism of violence and terrorism. The revolt of the oil-producing states of the Middle East has brought a significant shift in power to the disadvantage of the western industrial nations. The 'third world' has been transformed from a passive into a positive and disturbing factor in world affairs. In these conditions any expression of optimism has come to seem absurd. The prophets of woe have everything on their side. The picture of impending doom, sedulously drawn by sensational writers and journalists and transmitted through the media, has penetrated the vocabulary of everyday speech. Not for centuries has the once popular prediction of the end of the world seemed so apposite.

Yet at this point common sense prompts two important reservations. In the first place the diagnosis of hopelessness for the future, though it purports to be based on irrefutable facts, is an abstract theoretical construct. The vast majority of people simply do not believe in it; and this disbelief is made evident by their behaviour. People make love, conceive, bear and rear children with great devotion. Immense attention, private and public, is given to health and education in order to promote the well-being of the next generation. New sources of energy are constantly explored. New inventions increase the efficiency of production. Multitudes of 'small savers' invest in national savings bonds, in building societies and in unit trusts. Widespread enthusiasm is shown for the

preservation of the national heritage, architectural and artistic, for the benefit of future generations. It is tempting to conclude that belief in early annihilation is confined to a group of disgruntled intellectuals who are responsible for the lion's share of current publicity.

My second reservation relates to the geographical sources of these predictions of universal disaster, which emanate predominantly – I should be tempted to say, exclusively – from western Europe and its overseas offshoots. This is not surprising. For five centuries these countries had been the undisputed masters of the world. They could claim with some plausibility to represent the light of civilization in the midst of an outer world of barbarian darkness. An age which increasingly challenges and rejects this claim must surely build disaster. It is equally unsurprising that the epicentre of the disturbance, the seat of the most profound intellectual pessimism, is to be found in Britain; for nowhere else is the contrast between nineteenth-century splendour and twentieth-century drabness, between nineteenth-century supremacy and twentieth-century inferiority, so marked and so painful. The mood has spread over western Europe and – perhaps to a lesser degree – north America. All these countries participated actively in the great expansionist era of the nineteenth century. But I have no reason to suspect that this mood prevails elsewhere in the world. The erection of insurmountable barriers to communication on one side, and the incessant flow of cold war propaganda on the other, render difficult any sensible assessment of the situation in the USSR. But one can scarcely believe that, in a country where a vast majority of the population must be aware that, whatever their current complaints, things are far better than

they were twenty-five or fifty or a hundred years ago, widespread despair about the future has taken hold. In Asia both Japan and China in their different ways are in a forward-looking position. In the Middle East and Africa, even in areas which are at present in a state of turmoil, emergent nations are struggling towards a future in which, however blindly, they believe.

My conclusion is that the current wave of scepticism and despair, which looks ahead to nothing but destruction and decay, and dismisses as absurd any belief in progress or any prospect of a further advance by the human race, is a form of élitism – the product of élite social groups whose security and whose privileges have been most conspicuously eroded by the crisis, and of élite countries whose once undisputed domination over the rest of the world has been shattered. Of this movement the main standard-bearers are the intellectuals, the purveyors of the ideas of the ruling social group which they serve ('The ideas of a society are the ideas of its ruling class'). It is irrelevant that some of the intellectuals in question may have belonged by origin to other social groups; for, in becoming intellectuals, they are automatically assimilated into the intellectual élite. Intellectuals by definition form an élite group.

What is, however, more important in the present context is that all groups in a society, however cohesive (and the historian is often justified in treating them as such), throw up a certain number of freaks or dissidents. This is particularly liable to happen among intellectuals. I do not refer to the routine arguments between intellectuals conducted on the basis of common acceptance of main presuppositions of the society, but of challenges to these presuppositions. In western

democratic societies such challenges, so long as they are confined to a handful of dissidents, are tolerated, and those who present them can find readers and an audience. The cynic might say that they are tolerated because they are neither numerous nor influential enough to be dangerous. For more than forty years I have carried the label of an 'intellectual'; and in recent years I have increasingly come to see myself, and to be seen, as an intellectual dissident. An explanation is ready to hand. I must be one of the very few intellectuals still writing who grew up, not in the high noon, but in the afterglow of the great Victorian age of faith and optimism, and it is difficult for me even today to think in terms of a world in permanent and irretrievable decline. In the following pages I shall try to distance myself from prevailing trends among western intellectuals, and especially those of this country today, to show how and why I think they have gone astray and to strike out a claim, if not for an optimistic, at any rate for a saner and more balanced outlook on the future.

E. H. Carr

From E. H. Carr's Files: Notes Towards a Second Edition of What is History?

R. W. Davies

In the last few years before his death in November 1982 Carr was preparing a substantially new edition of *What is History?* Undaunted by the setbacks to human progress which characterized the twenty years which had elapsed since the first edition in 1961, Carr proclaims in his Preface that the intention of the new work was 'to strike out a claim, if not for an optimistic, at any rate for a saner and more balanced outlook on the future'.

Only the Preface was written up. But among Carr's papers a large box contains, together with an envelope crammed with reviews and correspondence relating to the 1961 edition, half-a-dozen brown foolscap folders bearing the titles: 'History – General; Causality – Determinism – Progress; Literature and Art; Theory of Revolution and Violence; Russian Revolution; Marxism and History; Future of Marxism'. He obviously intended to do much more work before completing the second edition. The folders contain the titles of many books and articles on which he had not yet made notes. But they also contain material which had already been partly processed: marked off-prints and articles torn from journals, and numerous handwritten jottings on bits of scrap paper of various sizes. Letters exchanged with Isaac

Deutscher, Isaiah Berlin, Quentin Skinner and others about the philosophy and methodology of history are also included in the folders, obviously with the intention of drawing upon them for the new edition. Occasional typed or handwritten notes are obviously first drafts of sentences or paragraphs. No plan for the proposed new edition is available, but a jotting reads:

> Disarray of History
> Assaults of Statistics
> Psychology
>
> *Structuralism*
> Disarray of Literature
> Linguistics
>
> *Utopia etc.*
> [a further scrap of paper reads:
> *'Last chapter*
> Utopia
> Meaning of History']

Carr evidently intended to write new sections or chapters dealing with topics neglected or inadequately covered in the first edition, as well as to expand the existing chapters of *What is History?* with responses to critics and with additional material illustrating and sometimes revising his argument. Sometimes an entirely new book on our present discontents and the world we should strive for seems to be struggling to emerge from his wide-ranging notes and jottings. Certainly he intended to provide a final chapter, or chapters, perhaps a completely rewritten version of Lecture VI on 'The Widening Horizon', which would present his own view on the meaning of history and his vision of the future, related more directly

than any of his previous writings to current political concerns.

Carr evidently saw little reason to revise the argument of his first two lectures on the historian and his facts and the historian and society. As an example of the false claims of the empiricist approach to the historical facts, he cites Roskill, the eminent naval historian, who praised 'the modern school of historians' who 'regard their function as no more than to assemble and record the facts of their period with scrupulous accuracy and fairness'. For Carr, such historians, if they really behaved as they claimed, would resemble the hero of a short story by the Argentine novelist Borges (translated as *Funes the Memorious*), who never forgot anything he had seen or heard or experienced but admitted that in consequence 'My memory is a garbage heap.' Funes was 'not very capable of thought' since 'to think is to forget differences, to generalize, to make abstractions.'[1] Carr defined and dismissed empiricism in history and the social sciences as the 'belief that all problems can be solved by the application of some scientific value-free method, i.e. that there is an objective right solution and way of reaching it – the supposed assumptions of science transferred to the social sciences'. Carr notes that Ranke, a talisman for empirical historians, was regarded by Lukacs as anti-historical in the sense that he presented a collection of events, societies and institutions, rather than a process of advance from one to another; 'history', wrote Lukacs, 'becomes a collection of exotic anecdotes.'[2]

Carr's notes provide weighty support for this onslaught on empiricism. Gibbon believed that the best history could only be written by an 'historian-philosopher', who distinguished

those facts which dominate a system of relations:[3] he proclaimed his debt to Tacitus as 'the first of the historians who applied the science of philosophy to the study of facts'.[4] Vico distinguished *il certo* (what is factually correct) from *il vero*; *il certo*, the object of *coscienza*, was particular on the individual, *il vero*, the object of *scienza*, was common or general.[5] Carr attributed the 'thinness and lack of depth in so much recent English political and historical writing' to the difference in historical method which 'so fatally separated Marx from the thinkers of the English-speaking world':

> The tradition of the English-speaking world is profoundly empirical. Facts speak for themselves. A particular issue is debated 'on its merits'. Themes, episodes, periods are isolated for historical study in the light of some undeclared, and probably unconscious, standard of relevance ... All this would have been anathema to Marx. Marx was no empiricist. To study the part without reference to the whole, the fact without reference to its significance, the event without reference to cause or consequence, the particular crisis without reference to the general situation, would have seemed to Marx a barren exercise.
>
> The difference has its historical roots. Not for nothing has the English-speaking world remained so obstinately empirical. In a firmly established social order, whose credentials nobody wishes to question, empiricism serves to effect running repairs ... Of such a world nineteenth-century Britain provided the perfect model. But in a time when every foundation is challenged, and we flounder from crisis to crisis in the absence of any guide-lines, empiricism is not enough.[6]

In any case, the veil of so-called empiricism serves to conceal unconscious principles of selection. 'History', Carr writes, 'is a particular conception of what constitutes human

rationality: every historian, whether he knows it or not, has such a conception.' In *What is History?* Carr devoted much attention to the influence of the historical and social environment on the selection and interpretation of facts by the historian, an aspect of the human condition which had fascinated him since student days. His notes for the new edition further exemplify the relativity of historical knowledge. Herodotus found a moral justification for the dominance of Athens in the role she played in the Persian Wars; and the Wars, demonstrating that the thinking Greeks must widen their horizons, persuaded Herodotus to extend his enquiry to more peoples and places.[7] The Arab view of history was strongly influenced by sympathy for the nomadic way of life. The Arabs saw history as a continuous or cyclical process in which dwellers in towns or oases were overrun by desert nomads, who settled and were then in turn overrun themselves by fresh waves from the desert; for Arab historians, the settled life bred luxury which weakened civilized people in relation to the barbarians. In contrast Gibbon in eighteenth-century England saw history not as cyclical but as a triumphant advance: in his famous phrase 'every age has increased, and still increases, the real wealth, the happiness, the knowledge and perhaps the virtue of the human race'. And Gibbon saw history from the vantage point of a self-confident ruling class in a long-established settled civilization. He held that Europe was secure from the barbarians since 'before they can conquer they must cease to be barbarians'. Carr remarks that revolutionary eras exercise a revolutionary influence on the study of history: there is 'nothing like a revolution to create an interest in history'. The English historians of the eighteenth century emerged in the

context of the triumph of the 'glorious revolution' of 1688. The French revolution undermined the 'a-historical outlook of the French enlightenment, which rested on a conception of unchangeable human nature'. In such times of rapid change the relativity of historical knowledge was widely recognized. Macaulay was merely stating the obvious to his contemporaries when he declared that 'the man who held exactly the same opinion about the Revolution in 1789, in 1794, in 1804, in 1814 and in 1834, would have been either a divinely inspired prophet or an obstinate fool'.[8]

Given the relativity of historical knowledge, in what sense can objective history be said to exist? In *What is History?* Carr argued that while no historian can claim for his own values an objectivity beyond history, an 'objective' historian can be said to be one with 'a capacity to rise above the limited vision of his own situation in society and in history', and with 'the capacity to project his vision into the future in such a way as to give him a more profound and more lasting insight into the past'. Several critics of *What is History?* strongly objected to this treatment of 'objectivity', and defended the traditional view that the objective historian is one who forms judgements on the basis of the evidence, despite his own preconceptions. Carr did not regard this as a serious criticism. His *History of Soviet Russia* often displays an extraordinary degree of 'objectivity' in the traditional sense, presenting evidence which other historians have frequently called upon to support interpretations which conflict with Carr's. But he regarded such conscientiousness as the necessary obligation of a competent historian; it did not mean that the historian's approach to the evidence was free from the influence of his social and cultural environment.

Nevertheless, Carr was prepared to acknowledge, somewhat cautiously, that progress occurs in the study of history as well as in the development of society, and that progress in historical knowledge is associated with increasing objectivity. In *What is History?* he acknowledged the great advances made by history in the past two centuries, and acclaimed the widening of our horizons from the history of élites to the history of the peoples of the whole world. Referring by way of example to the assessment of Bismarck's achievement by successive generations of historians, he argued (or admitted) 'that the historian of the 1920s was nearer to objective judgment than the historian of the 1880s, and that the historian of today is nearer than the historian of the 1920s'. But he then qualified this apparent acceptance of an absolute element in the historian's standard of objectivity, insisting that 'objectivity in history does not and cannot rest on some fixed and immovable standard of judgment existing here and now, but only on a standard which is laid up in the future and is evolved as the course of history advances.' The problem of objectivity in history evidently continued to trouble him after he had completed *What is History?* In his notes, while rejecting 'absolute and timeless objectivity' as 'an unreal abstraction', he writes: 'History requires the selection and ordering of facts about the past in the light of some principle or norm of objectivity accepted by the historian, which necessarily includes elements of interpretation. Without this, the past dissolves into a jumble of innumerable isolated and insignificant incidents, and history cannot be written at all.'

In *What is History?* Carr also approached the question of historical objectivity from another angle (though without

using the term 'objectivity' in this context). He examined the resemblances and differences in method between history and the natural sciences. The resemblances proved to be greater than the differences. Natural scientists no longer see themselves as establishing universal laws by induction from observed facts, but as engaging in discoveries through the interaction of hypotheses and facts. And history, like the natural sciences, is concerned not as is sometimes supposed with unique events but with the interaction between the unique and the general. The historian is committed to generalization, and indeed 'the historian is not really interested in the unique, but in what is general in the unique.'

For the new edition Carr collected extensive notes on the methodology of science. The trend of his thought emerges in his jottings, and I reproduce a selection of them without attempting to impose my own version of Carr's unwritten argument upon them (I have numbered each separate jotting individually):

(1) Formal or logical criterion of scientific truth; Popper believed that 'genuine' science was distinguished by a timeless rational principle ...

T. Kuhn rejected a single scientific method in favour of a succession of relativistic methods ...

Transition from static to dynamic view of science, from form to function (or purpose).

Relativism (no single 'scientific method') drives Feyerabend, *Against Method* (1975) to total rejection of rationalism.[9]

(2) Plato, *Meno*, raised question of how it is possible to pursue an enquiry in ignorance of what we are looking for (para

80d).

'Not until we have for a long time unsystematically collected observations to serve as building materials, following the guidance of an idea concealed in our minds, and indeed only after we have spent much time in the technical disposition of these materials, do we first become capable of viewing the idea in a clearer light, and of outlining it architectonically as a whole.'

Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), p. 835.

Popper's thesis that a hypothesis which fails to produce testable conclusions has no significance cannot be maintained (Natural Selection).

[See] M. Polanyi, *Encounter*, January 1972, from which the following [is also] taken ...

Einstein in 1925 remarked to Heisenberg that 'Whether you can observe a thing or not depends on the theory which you use. It is the theory which decides what can be observed.'

(3) [Marked by Carr in a lecture by W. F. Weisskopf]

'We comprehend the formation of such [mountain] ranges by tectonic activities of the earth's crust, but we cannot explain why Mt Blanc has the specific shape that we see today, nor can we predict which side of Mt St Helens will cave in at the next eruption ...

'The occurrence of unpredictable events does not mean that the laws of nature are violated.'

(4) D. Struik, *Concise History of Mathematics* (1963) shows social rootedness of mathematics.

(5) The theory that the universe began in some random way with a big bang and is destined to dissolve into black holes is a reflexion of the cultural pessimism of the age. Randomness is an enthronement of ignorance.

(6) Belief in dominant importance of heredity was progressive so long as you believe that acquired characteristics were inherited.

When this was rejected, the belief in heredity became reactionary.

See argument in C. E. Rosenberg, *No Other Gods: On Science and American Social Thought* (1976) [especially p. 10].

From these jottings it is evident that Carr had come to the conclusion that the relativity of scientific knowledge was greater than he had previously suggested. Time and place exert great influence on the theory and practice of the natural scientist. The interplay between hypothesis and concrete material in natural science closely resembles the interplay between generalization and fact in history. Valid scientific hypotheses do not necessarily possess the capacity for precise prediction which is often attributed to them; in some natural sciences they closely resemble the generalizations of the historian.

In the Lecture on 'Causation in History' in *What is History?* Carr examined the nature of historical generalization more closely. The historian is confronted with a multiplicity of causes of an historical event, and seeks to establish 'some hierarchy of causes which would fix their relation to one another'. In his notes for the new edition, Carr reproduces passages from Montesquieu and Tocqueville which adopt a similar point of view. Causes, wrote Montesquieu, 'become

some individuals are actually able to act unfettered by society, which frequently appears in the form of an insistence on the overwhelming importance of Great Men in History. Andrew Marvell emphatically claimed such a role for Cromwell:

> 'Tis he the force of scattered time contracts
> And in one year the work of ages acts.

In contrast Samuel Johnson declared:

> How small of all that human hearts endure
> That part that kings or laws can cause or cure.

But Johnson's was a mere 'rearguard action', writes Carr, 'against the belief that kings and laws do cause and cure evils'.

Against those who claim a decisive role for the individual will, which is independent or autonomous from society, Marx argued that the view which 'takes the *isolated* man as its starting point' is 'absurd' (*abgeschmackt*). Man 'originally appears as a generic being, a herd animal', who 'individualizes himself through the process of history'; 'exchange itself is a major agent of this individualization'.[14] Macaulay, writing about Milton, observed that 'in proportion as men know more, and think more, they look less at individuals and more at classes'.[15] And Tocqueville in 1852 gave classic expression to the notion that the actions of individual politicians are determined by forces outside themselves:

> Among all civilized peoples the political sciences create, or at least give shape to, general ideas; and from these general ideas are formed the problems in the midst of which politicians must struggle, and also the laws which they

> imagine they create. The political sciences form a sort of intellectual atmosphere breathed by both governors and governed in society, and both unwittingly derive from it the principles of their action.

Tolstoy consistently gave extreme expression to the view that individuals play an insignificant role in history: in one of the drafts of the epilogue to *War and Peace*, he bluntly stated that 'historical personages are the products of their time, emerging from the connection between contemporary and preceding events'.[16] His view was already fully formed by 1867:

> The zemstvo [Russian local government], the courts, war or the absence of war etc. are all manifestations of the social organism – the swarm organism (as with bees): anyone can manifest it, and in fact the best are those who don't know themselves what they are doing and why – and the result of their common labour is always a uniform activity and one that is familiar to the laws of zoology. The zoological activity of the soldier, the emperor, the marshal of the gentry or the ploughman is the lowest form of activity, an activity in which – the materialists are right – there is no arbitrariness.[17]

And thirty years later, on the outbreak of the Boer War, he wrote that it was no good being angry with 'the Chamberlains and the Wilhelms'; 'all history is a series of just such acts by all politicians', resulting from the effort to support the exceptional wealth of the few with new markets 'while the masses of the people are ground down by hard work'.[18]

Carr broadly shared the approach of Marx and Tocqueville. He noted that 'Individuals in History have "roles"; in some sense the role is more important than the individual.' He observed of Ramsay Macdonald that his 'wobbling was the