



Mr Carr's Big Battalions

Review of E. H. Carr, *What is History?*

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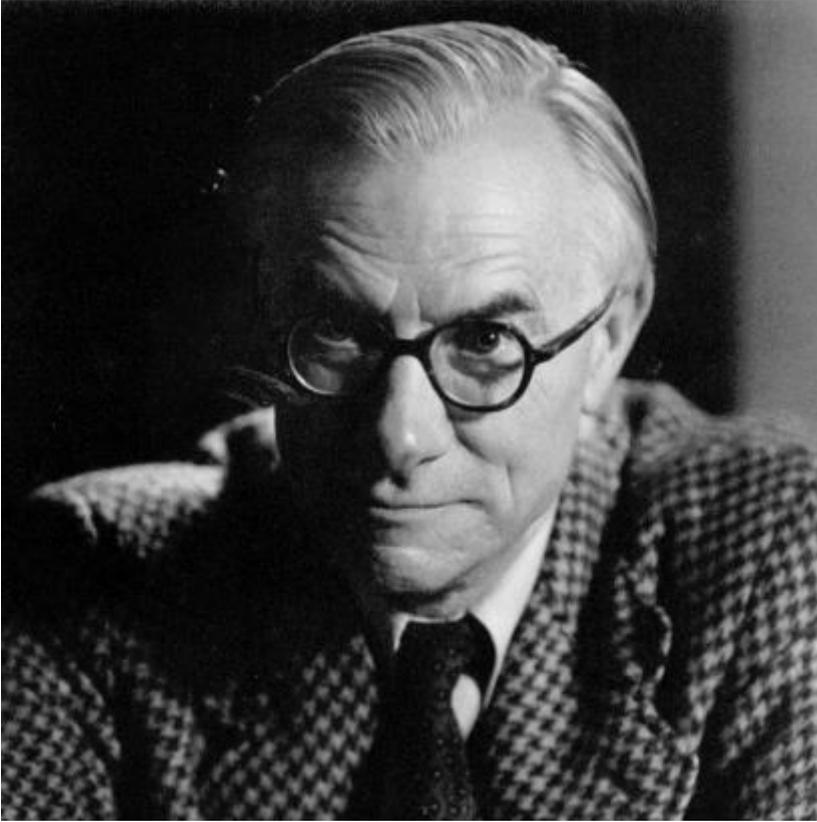
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Review of E. H. Carr, *What is History?*, *New Statesman* 63 (January–June 1962), no. 1608, 5 January 1962, 15–16



I MUST BEGIN by declaring an interest. In the broadcast version of these lectures Mr Carr did me the honour of referring to my views less frequently (though less favourably) only than those of Hegel and Marx. I have elsewhere tried to deal with Mr Carr's strictures, and, setting aside our differences about determinism and moral judgements in history, I shall confine myself to other topics

which Mr Carr discusses with characteristic pungency and zest in this clear, sharp, excellently written book.

It is a relief and a pleasure to see Mr Carr cast aside the self-imposed restraint of his magisterial history and fling himself with abandon upon real and imaginary opponents. Mr Carr here makes no pretence of impartiality; like the deeply committed thinker that he is, he sees no more than one side of any question. He does not deliberately avert his gaze: his vision is naturally simple and direct, his mind unpuzzled; knots which generations have sought to untie either do not exist for him, or seem only too easy to cut with one impatient blow. He must have enjoyed the composition of his lectures, and the reader (and listener) cannot, in his turn fail to enjoy the short work Mr Carr makes of some very venerable problems. And if, at the end of it, some of these problems seem to survive, surprisingly, unscathed, the performance remains a most exhilarating one.

Mr Carr begins by asking what are historical facts. Sir George Clark is frowned upon for speaking of the 'hard core of facts'. This notion seems to Mr Carr an illusion: the bare dates and places of events are not the basic material of history; historians select, arrange, interpret. Their views of what is a historical fact – i.e. the 'hard core' – are based on a priori assumptions and points of view which, do what they may, such writers cannot avoid: for these attitudes are rooted in the historian's social and historical situation, or that of his class or group. Grote's Pericles was a Benthamite reformer; Mommsen's Caesar owes more to the frustrations of liberal Germans in 1850 than to events in the Roman world; Acton and Bury were more optimistic than Sir George Clark or Sir Lewis Namier because they belonged to a securer civilisation; Namier was a sceptical Tory and thought little of the influence of ideas because the Central European world of his birth had collapsed and the English world in which he lived was in obvious decline; Meinecke's major works mark four different and incompatible attitudes, each wholly explicable in terms of changes in the fortunes of Germany; émigré historians exaggerate the horrors of Bolshevism. 'Before you study the history, study the historian. [...] Before you study

the historian, study his historical and social environment.' Some degree of objectivity may be shown by those who, by becoming conscious of their milieu, are able to rise a little above it and acquire a larger perspective, but in the end we are all bounded by our own times and positions in society.

Mr Carr concedes that he too may have altered his opinions in undeclared ways under the pressure of events – fanatical consistency, after all, may be a form of failure to respond to changing circumstances. Where does this lead him? Subjectivism? Tolstoyan scepticism about historical knowledge? Cynical pragmatism practised by those who accommodate their views to the demands of those in power? Mr Carr rejects these doctrines. His conclusions are eminently sensible but surprisingly tame.

One must neither seek to ignore present concerns, which alone give significance to the past (one cannot stand outside the stream of history – efforts not to read the present into the past are vain), nor let the sympathetic imagination wander too freely; the historian does not transcribe (Ranke was too naïve) or intuit (Collingwood was too extravagant, and Lytton Strachey contributed nothing to history). History is a process of 'interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past'. This is unexceptionable, but those who are troubled by the problem of historical objectivity, of fact versus interpretation, individual vision and public truth, will find little light here.

'It does not follow', says Mr Carr, 'that, because a mountain appears to take on different shapes from different angles of vision, it has objectively no shape at all, or an infinity of shapes.' What, then, does follow? He does not tell us. He says that the objective historian must gain a larger perspective by making himself conscious of his social and historical situation and by contriving to 'project his vision into the future' and so illuminate the past. This again is incontrovertible. Who can deny the value of prophetic gifts? As for awareness of one's predicament, psychological and social, the belief that it frees one from prejudices and passions and the irrational worship of some absolute standard – that is, idolatry – is one of the foundations of rational thought. In his peroration

Mr Carr pays noble homage to Marx and Freud as pioneers of genius in the endeavour of men to understand and control their lives by the use of reason: his tribute to these great discoverers could hardly be improved upon. Yet, true and just as his tribute is, it leaves the problem of objectivity untouched. For if we ask whether the Marxist or Freudian schema, in which we are to find our own place, is itself valid, or only a coherent fantasy to be explained in terms of Marx's or Freud's own peculiar predicament, where are we to look for the answer? Perhaps in the credentials of the methods used – whether their results can be checked by observation, not of one observer but of many, whether the logic of the arguments is internally consistent, whether they are accepted widely enough by those whose own claims to expertise can themselves be tested empirically.

But Mr Carr will have none of this. Such familiar considerations might seem to him to lead in the direction of philosophical abstraction, about which he is ironical. Yet, if he did take a step in this direction, he might perhaps agree that we are not mistaken in describing, say, Élie Halévy or Vasily Klyuchevsky as reasonably objective historians, even though one was a bitterly anti-revolutionary liberal living in a civilisation which Mr Carr could hardly call progressive, the other a conservative, loyal to a regime soon to collapse ignominiously, and neither with the least inkling of the future or any claim to see it; while we might refuse this title to Charles Beard or Mikhail Pokrovsky, even though the first lived in an expanding economy and was ardently interested in the future, and the second was a Bolshevik who participated in a victorious revolution.

Mr Carr's approach to other central questions is similar. With regard to the problem of the individual and the state, he tells us that the antithesis between man and society is invalid: they are interdependent; men (and historians) are social products; societies are altered by outstanding individuals; and so on. History is concerned not with individuals as such, but with masses of men, and especially with the unintended consequences of human acts. No man in his senses would wish to deny this.

But when Mr Carr goes on to assert that 'the facts of history are indeed facts about individuals, but not about [...] the motives, real or imaginary, from which individuals suppose themselves to have acted', and that historians like scientists, are interested only in those factors which can be generalised, we may ask: surely Lenin's conscious motives, as well as the forces that moulded his character and behaviour, are the concern of historians? If Churchill had died before 1939 or Stalin before 1924, is it arguable that these 'accidents', although not 'generalisable', would have been of no interest to anyone save biographers devoid of a sense of history? Surely Mr Carr here overstates his case. The attempt to apply the methods of natural science to what, in Aristotle's phrase, men 'do and suffer', leads at best to historical sociology. The difference between history, however sociological, and sociology, however historical, lies in the fact that, for sociologists, facts about individuals cannot be more than a sample or example: for historians they can be of interest as such.

Mr Carr ends his book by striking a blow for progress. Progress, he says, is 'the progressive development of human potentialities'. And then, as if aware that this may look circular, adds that such development is progressive when it moves towards the right goals. What are these goals? Here Mr Carr, usually so clear, becomes obscure: progress is a movement towards goals 'which can be defined only as we advance [16] towards them, and the validity of which can be verified only in a process of attaining them'. But the notion of goals which cannot be clearly seen, or certified as valid, until they have been reached, and whose only claim to validity is that they will be, or have been, attained – these goals are simply whatever in fact will turn out to have occurred. On this view, whatever occurs is good because it occurs – we know the stages we have passed to have been the right goals only because they have been realised.

This curious doctrine, although it has a formidable theological pedigree, is scarcely compatible with the notion of rational choice as it is normally understood. Yet it is the source of Mr Carr's entire view of history as the story of the big battalions, and of progress

as being whatever those in power will in fact achieve. For him the failures and the minorities belong, in Trotsky's famous words, to the 'rubbish heap of history'. There they must stay and not (despite the protests of sentimentalists like R. H. Tawney) be allowed to distract the attention of serious students of human affairs. Mr Carr's image of social life is that of a battleground in which the historian's business is to pick the winners. If, because of his temperament or class affiliation, he is hostile to them or pessimistic about the results of their activities, he will fail in his task, for only sympathy gives insight. Detachment is impossible; one cannot help taking sides, and the good historian will get himself accredited to the winning side, for one can see or understand little in the rout of defeat. This is the Big Battalion view of history, a moral and metaphysical, and not merely a historical, doctrine.

But whether this view is valid or not, it does not entail either that one understands only what one does not fear (a black reactionary like Joseph de Maistre perceived some frightening aspects of the French Revolution far more clearly than, say, Michelet or Kropotkin), or that no one can ever see a situation from more than one side – if novelists and playwrights can make all their personages real, why cannot historians see through the eyes of both Greeks and Persians, Reds and Whites? What is it to rise above one's situation and take a large view, which Mr Carr rightly favours, if it is not precisely this? Certainly those who recoil from events in horror and bury their face in their hands are not likely to write good history. This part of Mr Carr's thesis is important and true. Are all the victors in the conflicts of which history consists equally progressive, however? For his argument Mr Carr needs a vision of more specific goals.

When he tells us that each generation must sacrifice something to generations yet unborn, may we not ask who will sacrifice whom, and on what scale, and to how remote a future? Marx could afford to dogmatise because he entertained no doubts about the goal of history. But Mr Carr says that he knows nothing of any final solution. Yet demands for vast sacrifices seem reckless without a rational foundation for belief in such an all-justifying goal. Mr Carr

is equally unrepentant about the notion of liberty. Bertrand Russell is taken to task for saying that there is less liberty in the world today than a hundred years ago. He is accused of ignoring the gains of the many, even though these may have been won at the expense of the losses of the few. The losses are certainly clear enough: nor can it seriously be disputed that the many have gained vastly, both materially and spiritually, in our century: but whether these are gains in liberty is disputable. *Prima facie*, at any rate, Lord Russell's case is as plausible as Mr Carr's.

Having said so much in criticism, let me end on a more positive note. Mr Carr wonders how it is that in a world where human perspectives have changed so vastly as a result of the rise of new empires, the awakening of submerged peoples, the domination of new ideas, those responsible for the organisation of historical studies in his own University of Cambridge (and, as well he knows, in Oxford and elsewhere) have failed to respond to this transformation. It is not necessary to be a Marxist to believe that this self-insulation will not last indefinitely – that the ideological 'superstructure' will come into line with the social and economic base soon or late, and if our ancient universities continue as at present, late and awkwardly and resentfully. If Mr Carr's ardent reminder that America, Russia and China are no longer planets revolving round the European (still less the English) sun does no more than make some of our more influential academic ostriches aware of the strange figure they will present to the eyes of an incredulous posterity, it will have served the course of history and progress, and that not only in Mr Carr's special sense. Whatever may be thought of its arguments and theses, this is an admirably stimulating and intrepid book, a bold excursion into a region of central importance where most contemporary philosophers and historians, unaccountably, either fear or disdain to tread.