

BOOK REVIEW**WHAT IS HISTORY?****E.H. Carr****Reviewed by: Kajol Sharma****B.A. 3rd Year History (Hons.)****Introduction**

What does it actually mean to study history? At first, the question appears almost too obvious to require an entire book. History, after all, is generally understood as the study of the past. Yet, E.H. Carr's *What Is History?* demonstrates that apparently every simple question becomes complicated as soon as we ask how historians know the past, why certain events are remembered while others are forgotten and how far a historian can claim to be objective.

First published in 1961, *What Is History?* developed from Carr's George Macaulay Traveyan Lectures delivered at Cambridge University. The book consists of six lectures dealing with the historian and historical facts, the individual and society, history's relationship with science and morality, causation, progress of history and the widening scope of historical inquiry.

Carr's central argument is that history cannot be understood as a mere collection of facts. The past contains an almost limitless number of events, but historians select certain events as historically significant. Historical writing, therefore, involves both evidence and interpretation. Carr famously described history as a continuing interaction between the historian and historical facts, and as a dialogue between the past and the present.

This argument makes *What Is History?* particularly important for historiography. Carr is not primarily concerned with telling us what happened in a particular period. Instead, he asks us to examine the intellectual process by which historians decide what is worth knowing about the past and how it should be explained.

For a student of history, this is perhaps the most useful feature of the book. It forces us to move beyond memorizing dates, personalities and events, and to think about the discipline itself. At the same time, Carr's arguments are not beyond criticism. His emphasis on interpretation raises difficult questions about objectivity, while his discussion of progress and his predominantly European framework invite further debate.

The purpose of this review is therefore not mainly to summarize Carr's sixth chapters, but to examine his arguments critically and consider their significance for the study of history.

About the author

Edward Hallett Carr (1892-1982) was a British historian, diplomat and political thinker. He is particularly associated with his work on Soviet history and international relations, but his contribution to historiography is most famously represented by *What Is History?*

Carr wrote the book at a time when the traditional positivist conception of history was being questioned. The older approach often placed considerable faith in documentary evidence and the possibility of reconstructing the past objectively. Carr did not simply reject evidence, rather, he questioned the assumption that evidence automatically begins historical knowledge without the intervention of the historian.

His position is therefore more subtle, then the claim that "history is subjective." Carr repeatedly recognizes the authority of evidence. His argument is that evidence becomes historically meaningful through a process of selection and interpretation.

About the book

What Is History? was first published in 1961 by Macmillan consisting of six chapters based on Carr's Cambridge lectures.

These six chapters are not isolated discussions. They develop a connected argument. Carr begins by examining the historian's relationship with facts, then moves towards questions of society, scientific explanation, causation, progress and finally the expending scope of historical knowledge.

The structure of the book is one of its strengths. Instead of giving a narrow definition of history and stopping there, Carr tests his conception of history against several of the major problems, historians face.

Chapter 1: The Historian and His Facts

Summary

Carr begins with what appears to be the most basic question his historical study: what is a historical fact?

His answer challenges, the common assumption that all facts of the past are automatically historical facts. Countless things happened in the past, but only some of them survive in records and an even smaller number becomes significant enough to appear in historical writing.

Carr illustrates this through the example of Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon. Caesar's crossing is remembered as a major historical event, while countless other people who cross the same river are not normally considered historically significant. The difference lies in the significance attached to the historical interpretation.

Carr therefore distinguishes between the facts of the past and historical facts, the historian selects from the enormous mass of available information and gives certain facts a place within a historical narrative.

He also challenges the belief that facts speak for themselves. Facts do not independently announce their meaning. The historian decides which facts deserve attention, what context they should be placed in, and how they should be connected to other facts.

However, Carr does not conclude that historians are free to invent history. Historical evidence remains essential. The historian must work with evidence, and interpretation cannot simply disregard what the sources establish.

His conclusion is that history emerges from a relationship between the historian and historical facts. Neither can be completely separated from the other.

Critical Evaluation

This is arguably the most important chapter of the book because it establishes Carr's entire methodology. His distinction between the facts of the past and historical facts is persuasive because historical writing necessarily involved selection. No historian can reproduce everything that happened. The act of writing history requires deciding what deserves attention.

At the same time, this argument creates a problem. If historians determine which facts are significant, their own intellectual and social circumstances can influence historical narratives. This raises the possibility of bias.

Carr partly addresses this problem by refusing to equate interpretation with arbitrary invention. The historian remains answerable to evidence. The qualification is important because otherwise Carr's argument could collapse into complete relativism.

Nevertheless, the chapter leaves an important question unresolved: who determines the criteria by which a fact becomes significant?

Carr's answer is connected to the historian's own time and society but this makes the historian's position particularly powerful. His strongest contribution is therefore, not the rejection of objectivity itself, but the insistence that historians must become conscious of the processes through which they select and interpret evidence.

For a student, the lesson is straightforward: a textbook is not simply the past reproduced on paper. It is an interpretation constructed from surviving evidence.

Chapter 2: Society and The Individual

Summary

In the second chapter, Carr examines the relationship between the individual and society. He argues that neither can be understood completely without reference to the other.

The historian is often tempted to explain history through exceptional individuals: rulers, generals, reformers or revolutionaries. Carr questions this approach because individuals do not exist independently of their social environment. Their ideas, opportunities and actions are influenced by the society in which they live.

At the same time, Carr does not reduce individual to passive products of society. Individuals can influence and sometimes become important agents of historical change. The relationship is therefore reciprocal.

This argument can be understood through major historical figures. Napoleon, for example, was undoubtedly an important individual, but his rise cannot be explained solely through his personality. The political, social and military circumstances of revolutionary and post-revolutionary France were equally important.

Carr consequently rejects both extreme individualism and an explanation of history based entirely on impersonal social forces.

Critical Evaluation

Carr's discussion is valuable because it prevents historical writing from becoming either a collection of biographies or a completely impersonal account of social structures.

The strength of his argument lies in the idea that individual agency and social context must be studied together. A historical personality can influence society, but that personality is itself shaped by institutions, values and circumstances of the period.

However, Carr's emphasis on social context can sometimes make individual choice appear less important than it actually is. Historical actors do not always behave as predictable products of their circumstances. Individuals can make unexpected decisions, resist dominant expectations

and alter the course of events.

This becomes particularly important when historians study revolutionary situations, political crisis or moments of sudden change. Social conditions may make certain developments possible, but they do not necessarily determine the exact form those developments will take.

This chapter is the strongest when understood as a warning against simplistic explanations rather than as a complete theory of historical agency.

Carr's larger point remains important: the individual and society are not competing explanations of history; they are interconnected dimensions of it.

This is particularly relevant to modern social history, where historians increasingly examine the interaction between individual experiences and wider structures such as class, gender, economy, political institutions and culture.

Chapter 3: History, Science and Morality

Summary

The third chapter addresses two difficult questions: Can history be considered a science? And how should historians deal with morality?

Carr does not claim that history is identical to the natural sciences. Historians study human beings, whose actions are influenced by intentions, beliefs, social conditions and changing circumstances. Nevertheless, Carr argues that history shares important characteristics with scientific inquiry. Historians collect evidence, formulate explanations, identify relationships and attempt to discover patterns within human affairs. History involves more than simply narrating events.

Carr also examines the problem of moral judgement. Historians frequently judge people of the past according to moral standards derived from their own period. Carr argues that historical understanding requires attention to the circumstances in which people acted. This does not mean that his students must approve of everything they study. Rather, explanations should come before simplistic judgment.

Critical Evaluation

Carr's comparison between history and science is useful because it challenges the assumption that history is merely an art of storytelling. Historical explanation requires evidence and reasoning, and historians do attempt to establish relationships between events.

However, History cannot reproduce the methods of the natural sciences in exactly the same manner. Human beings are conscious actors. Their intentions, interpretations and responses form part of the subject being studied.

Carr is also persuasive in his warning against judging historical figures without historical context. Applying modern moral assumptions mechanically to the past can prevent genuine understanding.

Yet there is a danger in going too far in the opposite direction. Historical context should not become an excuse for avoiding moral questions altogether. Historians can attempt to understand why people acted as they did while still recognizing the consequences of those actions.

The most useful distinction here is between explaining an action and justifying it. A historian can explain the political circumstances that produced an event without necessarily defending

the event itself.

The chapter therefore encourages a balanced approach: historical scholarship should be analytical and evidence-based, but it also deals with human beings and cannot be separated completely from questions of values.

Chapter 4: Causation in History

Summary

The fourth chapter deals with one of the central tasks of historical explanation: causation.

Historical events rarely have a single cause. A revolution, war or economic crisis may result from political, social, economic, ideological and institutional circumstances operating together.

Carr argues that the historian's task is not simply to list everything that happened before an event. Instead, the historian must identify the causes that are historically significant. This requires judgment. Some circumstances may be necessary conditions, while others may be immediate triggers or merely incidental details.

Carr therefore distinguishes historical explanation from chronology. Chronology tells us what happened and when. Causal history attempts to explain why it happened.

Critical Evaluation

This chapter is particularly important because it establishes history as an explanatory discipline. A historical account that simply presents events in sequence may be factually correct but intellectually incomplete. If we want to understand the French revolution, for example, listing events from 1789 onwards does not explain where revolutionary conditions emerged in the first place.

Carr's insistence on selecting significant causes is therefore convincing. However, causal explanation is also one of the areas where historians can disagree most sharply. Two historians may accept the same evidence, but give different weight to economic conditions, political institutions, ideology or individual leadership.

This does not necessarily mean that one historian is simply wrong. It demonstrates that historical position involves interpretation. There is also a danger in explaining events too neatly after they have occurred. Once we know the outcome, causes can appear more inevitable than they actually were. Historians, therefore, need to remain conscious of contingency and alternative possibilities.

Carr's chapter is strongest when it reminds us that historical explanation requires reasoned selection rather than exhaustive listing. Its limitation is that the process of declining which causes are significant remains partly dependent on the historian's analytical framework.

The chapter ultimately reinforces Carr's wider argument: facts alone do not produce history. Historians have to organise facts into meaningful explanations.

Chapter 5: History as Progress

Summary

In the fifth chapter, Carr examines the controversial idea of progress in history. He rejects the simplistic belief that history moves continuously upward in a straight line. Human history con-

tains wars, disasters, political failures and periods of regression. Progress, therefore, cannot mean an interrupted improvement.

Nevertheless, Carr does not abandon the concept completely. He argues that human beings accumulate knowledge and experience across generations. Unlike biological inheritance, social knowledge can be transmitted and developed relatively quickly. For Carr, progress is therefore connected to the development of human potential. It is not a predetermined destination or a guaranteed movement towards perfection.

He also connects the historian's understanding of the past with the future. Historical knowledge becomes meaningful partly because it allows human beings to understand the direction and possibilities of change.

Critical Evaluation

This chapter is one of the most debatable parts of the book. Carr is right to reject a simplistic model of history in which every generation is automatically better than the previous one. The twentieth century itself provided more than enough evidence against such optimism.

At the same time, his defence of historical progress rests heavily on the accumulation of knowledge and experience. This is persuasive to an extent, but knowledge alone does not guarantee ethical or social improvement. Scientific and technological development can produce both beneficial and destructive consequences.

Carr's conception of progress is therefore, strongest when understood as the expansion of human possibilities rather than as guarantee of moral perfection.

Another important point is that Carr does not treat progress as inevitable. This makes his position more nuanced than the nineteenth-century idea of continuous advancement.

However, his argument still carries a degree of optimism about the ability of human beings to learn from history. Whether society actually learns from the past is an open question.

The chapter also raises a broader historiographical issue: historian's ideas about progress are influenced by their own historical circumstances. A historian living during a period of political optimism may see the past differently from one writing after war, economic crisis or social upheaval.

Thus, Carr's discussion of progress also returns us to his central concern-the relationship between the historian's present and interpretation of the past.

Chapter 6: The Widening Horizon

Summary

The final chapter considers the changing scope of historical inquiry. Carr observes that historians have increasingly moved beyond the traditional emphasis on rulers, wars, diplomacy and political institutions. Historical inquiry has expanded towards economic life, society, culture, science, ideas and ordinary people.

This extension is significant because human history cannot be adequately understood through political events alone. Economic structures can influence politics, social movements can transform institutions, ideas can shape political action, and technological changes can alter societies.

Carr therefore sees history as a discipline with an increasingly broad field of inquiry. The widening horizon also reflects the changing questions historians ask. As societies change, historians develop new interests and return to older subjects from different perspectives.

Critical Evaluation

This chapter remains especially relevant today because historical scholarship has expanded considerably beyond traditional political history. The rise of social history, economic history, women's history, cultural history, environmental history and history of marginalized communities demonstrates the value of Carr's argument that the historian's horizon can widen.

However, the chapter also exposes one of the limitations of Carr's own work. His examples and intellectual framework remains strongly connected to European historical experience. A truly widening horizon should include not only additional subjects but also different geographical and intellectual traditions.

This is particularly important from the perspective of Indian and post colonial historiography. This expansion of historical inquiry must involve questioning whose records were preserved, whose voices were excluded and, whose interpretation of the past became dominant.

Carr's argument can therefore be extended beyond what he himself explicitly discusses. If history is an interaction between the historian and the past, then historians from different societies may legitimately ask different questions of the same historical evidence.

This does not make interpretation equally convincing. Evidence, reasoning and historical context still matter. But it does not demonstrate that the discipline of history is not intellectually static. The final chapter, consequently provides a fitting conclusion to the book: the study of history expands as human beings develop new questions about themselves and their past.

Overall Critical Evaluation

The greatest strength of *What Is History?* is that Carr makes the reader think about history as a discipline of inquiry rather than a warehouse of information.

His argument concerning historical facts is particularly valuable. Historians cannot possibly reproduce the entire past, so selection is unavoidable. The important issue is whether that selection is responsible, evidence based and intellectually defensible.

Carr is also convincing in his insistence that historical explanation requires causation. Historians who merely record events chronologically may provide information without providing understanding.

His treatment of society and the individual is similarly useful because it avoids reducing history either to great men or completely impersonal forces.

However, the book has limitations.

The first is the danger of relativism. Carr's emphasis on interpretation can be misunderstood as implying that historical truth is entirely dependent upon the historian. His own argument is more cautious than this, since he repeatedly acknowledges the importance of evidence, but the tension remains.

The second limitation is his discussion of progress. Carr avoids crude optimism but his faith in the accumulation of human experience can still appear optimistic when considered against the violence and destruction of modern history.

Finally, Carr's arguments should not be treated as the final word on historical methodology. His ideas generated considerable debate, most notably with historians such as Geoffrey Elton. Elton objected to Carr's treatment of historical facts and the historian's role, demonstrating that the question of objectivity remained contested.

Yet this controversy is itself evidence of the book's importance. Carr's work is valuable not because every argument is beyond criticism, but because it forces historians to confront questions they might otherwise take for granted.

Suggestions

Although *What Is History?* remains an important work, arguments can be developed further. First, the book would have benefitted from a broader geographical range. Carr's discussion is strongly shaped by European historical experience. Including Asian, African and other historiographical traditions would have made treatment of historical interpretation more comprehensive.

Second, Carr could have given greater attention to power and preservation of sources. Historical evidence does not survive randomly. States, institutions, colonial administrations, religious organizations and social elites have often determined what was recorded and preserved. This is particularly important when studying groups whose voices were historically marginalized.

Third, Carr's discussion of interpretation could have been accompanied by a fuller discussion of the limits of interpretation. Historians inevitably interpret evidence, but interpretation cannot be unlimited. Those surviving source material, chronology, context and standards of historical reasoning constrain what can reasonably be argued.

Finally, students should read Carr comparatively rather than in isolation. His arguments become much clearer when placed alongside historians who approach historical knowledge differently.

Conclusion

E.H. Carr's *What Is History?* is ultimately a book about the relationship between the past, the historian and the present.

Carr rejects the idea that historians simply collect facts and reproduce them without interpretation. At the same time, he does not give historians unlimited freedom to invent the past. Historical writing exists between evidence and interpretation. His discussion of facts, society, science, morality, causation, progress and widening scope of historical inquiry return to this central problem.

The book is not without weaknesses. Some of Carr's assumptions can be questioned, particularly his treatment of progress and the predominantly European framework of his examples. His emphasis on interpretation also raises legitimate concerns about the boundaries of objectivity.

Yet these limitations do not make the book irrelevant. In fact, they make it more useful as a historiographical text because they encourage the reader to argue with Carr rather than simply accept him.

For me, the most valuable lesson of *What Is History?* is that historical study does not end with knowing what happened. Historian must also ask why certain events have been remembered, why others have disappeared, how an event has been selected, what causes are considered significant and how the concerns of the present influence our understanding of the past.