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The Great British Historiography Debate

Perhaps the most prominent characterization of the historiographical debate which had taken place during the 1960s between the two British historians **E.H. Carr** and **Geoffrey Elton**, is how far its significance has exceeded its original intra-disciplinarian context. It has done so, however, only because both the direct methodological implications and broader theoretical meanings of the confrontation, served as a reflection on a small scale of the Modern intellectual analogy to a geological rift caused by tectonic plates movement. The opposing views of the two regarding the proper criteria for assessing scientific value and validity of a historical study, as well as the overall social position and functions of the discipline, are merely a specific case of a multilayered and often self-contradictory conflict between two philosophical, social and political trends in Modern thought, embodied by Liberal Humanism and Marxist Dialectical Materialism. The internal ambivalence of the stances presented both by **Elton** and **Carr**, serves in more than one way as a precursor of the later clash between Modern worldviews in general, and their Postmodern adversaries.

This notion is sharply illustrated by the complex standpoint **Richard J. Evans** takes in his book *In Defence of History*¹ in relation to both the historiographical model offered by **Carr's** *What Is History?* and the one presented by **Elton** as a critical reaction to it in *The Practice of History*. **Evans's** double dispute with the Postmodern dismantling of history on the one hand, and with the Conservative fossilization of it on the other hand, conducts a dialogue with the heritage of his two predecessors. Quite surprisingly, it reveals in the process that each of the ostensibly inverse positions taken by the two historians contains aspects which can be recruited by both fractions in the current controversy. This, in turn, illustrates the assumed dichotomy between Right-Wing Conservatism and Pseudo-Left-Wing Postmodernism as inherently illusive, since the two share profound, although well disguised, similarities.

¹ Richard J. Evans, "Author's response to his critics," *History in focus* 2, "What Is History?" (1999), <http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Whatishistory/evans.html> (accessed May 22, 2011).

On the methodological level, **Carr** contemptuously argues against what he saw as the conservative historian's false pretension to be able to conduct an empirically objective and factually-based scientific research². He maintained that what we refer to as historical facts by no means can independently emerge from the evidence itself. It is merely an inevitably subjective interpretation of them, determined by the historian's prior assumptions and inclinations, and by the resultant selective manner in which he treats the materials in his disposal. **Carr** makes a distinction between "facts of the past", which are the sum of all the available data which the historian has the potential to make use of, and "historical facts", which are the few of them which he would actually choose to include in his research. Thus, the role of the historian is not to provide his readers with an impartially descriptive account which is strictly limited to pure facts, that is, to particular and concrete occurrences. On the contrary, it is to identify regular patterns among different phenomena, to disregard singular anomalies and concentrate on the generalized and the regular, and to abstract his findings in the purpose of constructing interpretative theories. since "The belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian" is dismissed by **Carr** as "a preposterous fallacy"³, the remaining criterion for evaluating the validity of a historical work seems to be instrumental, rather than epistemological. In **Carr's** view, the value of historical writing is determined not by its loyalty to the facts, but by the social and political function it fulfills. Radical as this notion may sound, it is likely that **Carr** did not mean by it to exempt historians from the restraints of professional ethics in general, but simply to indicate that 'the truth is out there', that is, beyond the reach of any individual account of history. More specifically, this fundamental distrust in the validity of ideas in general and of personal cognition in particular, appears to be an expression of Marxist thought, considering both concepts to be illusive guises for economic interests⁴.

² Wikipedia, "E.H.Carr", http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E._H._Carr (accessed May 22, 2011).

³ E.H. Carr, *What Is History?* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 12.

⁴ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977).

Faithful to the Dialectic Materialistic worldview which he had gradually embraced, and of which he had ultimately become a devoted follower², Carr asserted that socially conventionalized belief systems, ideas and values are in fact a reflection, often distorted, of intra-social economic conditions and class hierarchy. The autonomous existence of the individual is a false notion, since we are all inevitable products of the material circumstances in which we have grown. We are, thus, mere pawns, driven by uncontrollable and impersonal forces which can be conceptualized, among other things, as the economic interest of the social class to which we belong⁴. The Liberal Humanist faith in the freedom of will and rationality of thought, for instance, cannot be detached from the social context in which it is rooted, that is, the capitalist order which depends on the exploitive nature of the so-called free market. The self-perceived liberty produced by this kind of concepts is, ironically, vital for the preservation of the Modern form of enslavement it disguises. Thus, they should be seen as parts of the ideological superstructure of society ("ideology" in the Marxist sense of false consciousness⁵), whose purpose is to justify and therefore maintain the social base, that is, the actual material condition which consists human reality. The unavoidable biases of the historian, thus, are a necessary consequence of his being no more than a symptom of the society in which he lives. Two conclusions may derive from this notion. The first is that a disillusioned view of reality should reject the humanist idea according to which the human being is able to actively take charge over his own destiny, and replace it with an acknowledgment of historical determinism. However, the fact that human beings are ultimately bound to act according to the interests of the wider group to which they belong, seems to brighten the dark shades of the individual's inherent passivity. It assures humanity, in a pseudo-scientific manner, that its internal, natural and predetermined mechanism dictates to it to constantly improve its existential condition. Progress, thus, is established by this seemingly skeptical philosophy as an unstoppable force.

Carr's acceptance of the Marxist thesis, which he translated in his unique way to suit his own anti-liberal sentiment², had significant impact both on his historiographical approach and on his political views. On the intra-disciplinary sphere, he has taken a

⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991), 89.

revisionist stance regarding the conservative focus on political history, that is, of specific events and fateful decisions made by individuals of the ruling classes. Instead, he has claimed that the "bedrock" of historical study should be social history, which he defined as "the study of economic factors, of social conditions, of statistics of population, of the rise and fall of classes"⁶. Politically, throughout the years of his long lasting diplomatic career in and later, academic one as an international relations scholar, **Carr** Gradually developed a growing disappointment of the pessimism, the desperation and the decay which he attributed to western civilization². His view of Liberalism as the sinking ideology of the 'bourgeois' nations (or, in his terminology, the "have" powers) has either led him to develop a sympathetic approach towards different forms of totalitarianism, or served to rationalize already existing authoritarian tendencies. One way or another, it appears that his division of the nations to "have" and "have not" powers was influenced by the **Corradinian**⁷ distinction between "proletarian" and "plutocratic" nations, later adopted by **Mussolini**. By analyzing both National Socialism and Stalinism as authentic outbursts of exploited proletarian sentiments, **Carr** paved the way for his blind justification of Soviet policy in his remaining years, and his automatically classifying virtually every aspect of it as "progressive", as opposed, for instance, to the "reactionary" American policy. A noteworthy manifestation of **Carr's** fierce, presumably unconditioned faith in this gradually acquired secular religion, was his notion that the discipline of history should be subjugated, or perhaps voluntarily recruited, to the worldwide purpose of advancing the inevitable revolution of progress. In a manner which can be seen as a precursor of the later Postmodern politicization of academic disciplines, **Carr** seems to have been asserted that since the historian is already, unavoidably, motivated by some political agenda, the academy should at least ensure that it is a progressive one. In **Carr's** opinion, that meant to investigate the past in a way which would contribute to changing the present, and thus creating a better future. Although one can certainly doubt that this

⁶ E.H. Carr, *What Is History?* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 171.

⁷ Reference to Enrico Corradini (1865 – 1931) Italian novelist, essayist, journalist and nationalist political figure.

was **Carr's** intention, this historiographical logic implicitly legitimize the subjugation of historical writing to political authority, and more specifically, to Soviet propaganda. Moreover, in his book *In Defence of History*, **Evans** argues against the conclusion which derives from it, that investigating the past is only worthwhile if it is usable for changing the present¹.

Considering that *The Practice of History* was written to a large extent as a reaction to *What Is History?*, it is scarcely surprising that the opposing views of **Elton** and **Carr** could be described in short as the mirror images of one another. As an uncompromising defender of the traditional assumptions and methodology of the historical discipline, **Elton** denies almost all of **Carr's** arguments which were previously discussed. His "Empirical" or "Thesis-Free" Method determines that the historian is both capable and obligated to rely solely on hardcore evidence, in reconstructing the causal sequences of past events⁸. His role is not to make theoretical interpretations of his findings, as **Carr** has claimed, but to concentrate on concrete and specific events and actions which he can scientifically and objectively prove their past occurrence. While in **Carr's** view, history is inexplicable (in the sense that the objective truth is inaccessible, or at least indescribable, without being altered by the researcher's subjective viewpoint) but predictable, in **Elton's** opinion it is vice versa; the historian is able to obtain the truth via rational thinking, or reason, but since history is driven by human free will, it is essentially unpredictable. **Elton** has also inverted **Carr's** hierarchy between personal and impersonal factors as causal agents. In **Carr's** view, the driving force of history is almost exclusively wide and abstract processes, rarely identified by the masses who are controlled by them. Individuals or specific events only play a secondary role in historical development, either by 'riding on the back' of social forces or by taking a limited part in shaping them². **Elton**, on the other hand, portrays an opposite picture, in which "situational factors" (which even then are to a large extent the result of human decisions), which may restrict or enable the occurrence of certain events, are secondary to the "direct factors" which actually cause those events⁷. History, thus, is not merely the product

⁸ Geoffrey Roberts., "Defender of the Faith: Geoffrey Elton and the Philosophy of History," *Chronicon* 2, pp. 1-22 (1998), <http://www.ucc.ie/chronicon/elton.htm> (accessed May 24, 2011).

of predetermined processes and uncontrollable circumstances, but of the ways in which individuals have chosen to deal with them. Accordingly, while **Carr** considers political history to be an advisable addition to the social one, **Elton** maintains that it is the most important form of history. **Elton** strongly objects **Carr's** belief that the study of the past should be subjugated to the promotion of present agendas or used to make predictions about the future. Instead, he maintains that the past should be studied for its own sake, and not as an instrument for the fulfillment of a secular messianic agenda. The opposition between the two may be even further illustrated by the fact that **Elton** was a right-wing Thatcherite and an admirer of Churchill⁹. It is hard to think of a political standpoint more polarized to the views of **Carr**, "a Stalinist if ever there was one"¹, in **Evans's** words, which prior to the Second World War had, quite ironically, condemned **Churchill** for not being appeasing enough, in **Carr's** opinion, towards the Nazi regime².

It may be worth noting that both **Carr** and **Elton** have objected to the same phenomenon of blurred disciplinary boundaries, from opposite directions. **Elton** argued against it due to the danger of politicization he saw as embedded in abstracting historical account of facts into a social theory or philosophy⁸. **Carr**, on the other hand, criticized the trend precisely because he saw the merging of different disciplines as symptomatic to the hegemonic social status of reactionary forces, or in other words, because it prevents history from fulfilling the political function in which he was interested². **Carr**, then, opposed inter-disciplinary fuzziness because he saw it as preventing the very same politicization which **Elton** feared it may cause.

Evans's *In Defence of History* was written approximately three decades following the **Carr-Elton** Debate, mainly as a response to the Postmodernist attempts to negate the very possibility of a historical account to be anything more than one of countless potential narratives, none of which can be determined to be more valid than the rest¹⁰. Against this simplistically relativist notion, which delegitimizes the existence of history as a scientific discipline, **Evans**, while recognizes the unavoidable

⁹ Wikipedia, "Geoffrey Elton", http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geoffrey_Elton (accessed May 23, 2011).

¹⁰ Wikipedia, "Richard J. Evans", http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_J._Evans (accessed May 21, 2011).

subjectivity of the field, stresses the irreplaceable vitality of a "weak" and "qualified", rather than "strong" and "traditional", standard of objectivity. In a sentence he has added to the penultimate paragraph in the American and German editions of the book, **Evans** clarifies his definition of this concept, writing that "Objective history... is researched and written within the limits placed on the historical imagination by the facts of history and the sources which reveal them, and bound by the historian's desire to produce a true, fair, and adequate account of the subject under consideration¹". This historiographical demand, which in my opinion is both justified and necessary, seems to place **Evans** alongside both **Carr** and **Elton**, as spokesmen of two opponent Modern worldviews, and on the opposing side to postmodern relativism. Under closer examination, however, his position regarding each of the three trends (Conservatism, Marxism and Postmodernism), as well as the tripartite relations between the latter, are revealed to be complex, ambiguous and often contradictory.

Evans implicitly illustrates certain resemblances between **Carr** and **Elton**, whose books, he notes, maintain a fundamental status in the present teaching of historical epistemology¹. He does so, for example, by stating that the Marxist historian who focus on impersonal forces, and the conservative ones who take into consideration only high politics, are actually analogous in dismissing all history of the "great mass" of "ordinary, unpolitical subjects" as unimportant. In a similar manner, **Evans** rejects the perhaps equally tendentious and dogmatic pseudo-scientific models of objectivity presented by both historians. In **Carr's** case, he does so on the grounds of the fact that his definitions to both objectivity and causation are shaped by his belief in a Soviet-like socio-economical order to be the inevitable future of mankind. In **Elton's** case, on the other hand, **Evans** criticizes his simplistic denial that there are subjective aspects to the historians work, his conservative objection to the development of innovative disciplinarian branches such as women's history and social history, and his narrow-minded claim that political history of the nation state is the one true history. **Evans** sharpens his disagreement with the two by writing that "obscurantist conservatism of the sort to which **Elton** too often fell prey, and

Stalinist Marxism of the sort which ultimately lay at the root of **Carr's** work, are both objectionable as well as inadequate bases for historical scholarship and thought.¹¹

Further discussion of the debate may indicate that on the surface level, **Carr's** historiographical approach presents itself as amorally objective and scientifically diagnostic. His claim that a historian should not apply his own present values in evaluating the past, may be seen as a precursor of the later Postmodernist moral relativism. However, as is the case with his radical followers, **Carr's** assumed moral neutrality is merely a guise for a highly judgmental attitude, which adapts the more conservative and liberal forms of passing judgment to the pseudo-impartial ones of the newer Marxist meta-narrative. The main difference between the two is that while the former tags individuals as "good" or "bad", the latter softens its ethical implication by changing the labels into "progressive" and "reactionary". **Carr**, then, loyal to its new Marxist religion, has merely shifted, the historical focus from the individual to the collective, and converted the explicit moralizing stance into an implicit one. By doing so he preserved, in the most 'whiggish' manner possible, both the cult of progress, and the privilege of passing moral judgments of past occurrences on the basis of present views.

While the last note emphasized the almost medieval religious-like aspects of **Carr's** Marxist philosophy, comparing it with **Elton's** would also mark distinct similarities between it and later Postmodern schools. Marxist thought, together with the Nietzschean and the Freudian one, were the three Modern intellectual discourses classified by French relativism propagator **Paul Ricoeur** as consisting of "hermeneutics of suspicion"¹¹. The common denominator between the three was that they can be propagated by Postmodernists by being interpreted as emphasizing the passivity and helplessness that are inherent in the inability of the subject to be individualized, that is, to act instead of being activated by forces beyond his control. these forces may be internal, as in Freud's Unconscious; external, as in Marx's historical determinism; or both, as in the Postmodern conception of hegemonic

¹¹ David Stewart, "The Hermeneutics of Suspicion," *Literature and Theology* 3, , pp. 296-307 (1989), <http://litthe.oxfordjournals.org/content/3/3/296.extract> (accessed May 21, 2011).

discourse as intruding the illusive autonomy of the subject, which in his inevitable response to its interpolation is denied from any possibility of being free from the relations of power in which he is placed. Both **Althusser's** term "interpolation" and **Foucault's** "relations of power", it may be worth mentioning, are developments of originally Marxist worldviews. Interestingly, thus, it is Carr's approach, and not the Liberal Humanist or the Conservative ones he attacks, who appears to be the pessimistic, the defeatist and the discouraging one.

Ironically, there appears to be a double chiasmic correspondence between the different stances of the two regarding the potentials and limitations of the study of history. On the surface level, **Carr** appears to deny in a both contemptuous and ostensibly disillusioned manner, the pretension of the historian to be objectively factually-based. On the other hand, he at the same time defends the scientific validity of his discipline, thus affirming the very same pretension. The relations between the underlying intentions of the two historians, however, appear to be quite the opposite. **Carr** actually uses his claim regarding the historian's inevitable subjectivity for removing the socially-conventionalized chains embedded in the striving for scientific objectivity. Thus, he allows history to serve in an uninhibited, unrestrained and careless manner, the political realization of the Marxist idea, which he perceives as an absolute truth. **Carr's** stance regarding the social role of history is anything but humble, then, in contrast to what could be mistakenly assumed due to his suspicious attitude towards its validity. In fact, he appears to fiercely believe in the ability of the intellectual to comprehend undeniable truths. They are simply not factually-based, carefully-verified and thus limited ones, but universal, timeless and implicitly-assumed, such as the inevitable triumph of progress, and also the undisputable validity of the judgment of value expressed in dividing historical processes into "progressive" and "reactionary" rival camps. The role which **Carr** destines for the historian, then, is pretentiously grandiose. His mission is to serve as a secular apostle, carrying the gospel of the new Marxist god, which is the historical determinism which **Carr** defines as progress.

Although disguised as an impartially objective analysis of political reality, this view is profoundly religious, in the sense that it is nourished by the same psychological mechanisms of blind, uncritical and unconditioned trust which underlie the traditional belief systems. Comparing to it, **Elton's** expectations of history, although possible simplistic, are far more modest, and he approaches the attempt to fulfill them in both cautiousness and skepticism. By asserting that history does have the potential for reaching certain truths, he paradoxically emphasizes exactly what **Carr** ignores; that is, the perpetually incomplete and deficient manner in which it does so, and the restrictions which the historian thus must impose on himself as a necessary condition for withstanding the test of verifiability, and stand up to the scientific standards of his discipline.

A middle-way between **Carr's** *dogmatic* Marxist determinism and **Elton's** traditional unrestrained faith in free will, may be that the human being does have reason and the ability to use it for actively determining his own fate, and is thus not a mere pawn of the material circumstances in which he lives. On the other hand, the choices human beings make of how to deal with circumstances beyond their control, are made collectively. They cannot be seen as the product of specific individuals or events, since those are merely the cumulative account of countless individual actions. Although those were made partially out of free will, only together, that is, beyond the reach of individual choice, could they actually shape reality. However, they can be the result of conscious personal free choices made by individuals which coordinate them with each other, and thus willingly and knowingly unite to achieve common purposes. This tripartite scale may be a reflection of the underlying assumptions of three political regime forms: the Communism represented by **Carr's** view, the Social Democratic national state suggested by my view, and the Conservative or Liberal one reflected by **Elton's** view of high politics conducted by a small number of ruling individuals as the driving force of history.

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