

A scientific approach to history history essay



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Any scientific approach to the study of history contains certain inherent difficulties. For one thing, although History deals to a great extent with an analysis of tangible facts, these facts can be presented in a range of subjective contexts and are therefore open to a great deal of interpretation. By suggesting that History is "...an unending dialogue between the present and the past"[1], E. H. Carr is recognising the degree to which modern opinion changes and affects the way in which the past is viewed. Regarding each point of historical analysis, there is a modern consensus that is in a state of flux, regularly altered by either changes in our understanding of historical fact (e. g. new discoveries, which change how we view past events) or changes in how we interpret existing historical fact (e. g. new fashions that alter how social and cultural patterns are viewed). Carr's statement reflects the degree to which even relatively small changes in modern philosophical approaches to history can have a massive impact on the way that historical events and individuals are put into context. However, to suggest that this process is inevitable is another matter, and would seem to indicate that modern historians are unable to see the past without their view being substantially affected by the context of their surroundings. And, what's more, they are unable to do anything about it. Determining whether such 'present-mindedness' is inevitable therefore strikes at the very heart of some of the most basic assumptions and debates concerning the role of the historian.

To an extent, Carr's approach was so highly theoretical that it can be argued that he missed many of the most fundamental aspects of historical endeavour. Carr was influenced by the transformation of the late nineteenth

century obsession with objectivity, which had given way to a new sense of the importance of subjective analysis and the author-historian's relation to the subject. For example, Carr noted that "empirical theory of knowledge presupposes a complete separation between subject and object. Facts, like sense-impressions, impinge on the observer from outside, and are independent of his consciousness"[2]. By seeking to separate the observer from the facts of history, Carr can be seen to have been taking a fairly crude approach to the problem of navigating the numerous interpretive approaches. For example, his comments on the dual nature of 'facts' and 'sense impressions' seem designed to emphasise the 'present-mindedness' of the historical approach and to go against the idea of cold, hard, indisputable facts. This is, to an extent, a necessary argument in light of his contention that the dialogue between past and present is 'unending'; clearly, the ending of any doubts concerning factual matters would end the dialogue. Nevertheless, to suggest that there are no elements of historical fact that can be taken as definite might be argued to be somewhat extreme hyperbole. The inevitability of 'present-mindedness', as proposed by Carr, can be taken to indicate the degree to which historical endeavour often runs counter to known, and accepted, aspects relating to the nature of history itself.

Richard J. Evans notes that Carr "...declared that historians should only be interested in causes of historical events insofar as their explanation served the making of policy in the future"[3]. In this sense, Carr can be seen to have been contextualising present-day historical endeavour as a starter to the main course of forming future policy decisions. In this light, Carr's arguments

position History as having a utilitarian purpose, i. e. driving the formation approaches to key issues, based on past events. There is a non sequitur at the heart of this approach, since Carr is simultaneously arguing for the idea that history is constantly open to subjective analysis, while suggesting that such analysis can provide a firm basis for future action. To me, this does not make sense from a logical point of view. It's clear, therefore, that although Carr proposes that the nature of historical analysis leads to an 'unending dialogue', he sees this as a function of man's approach to history rather than as something that inherently emerges from history itself. Carr's argument seems based on the idea that despite the subjective nature of History, it might nevertheless be possible to define certain received facts in such a way as to construct a set of commonalities that can underpin subsequent analytical approaches. Evans goes on to suggest that "Carr's insistence that history should be politically relevant... brought problems, especially in its linkage with the idea that the vast majority of human beings in the past were of no interest to the historian because they had made no contribution to political change. It was precisely this idea that the social historians of the 1960s set out to challenge"[4]. Carr's utilitarian approach to history – the idea that its study has a purpose, and that this purpose can define the parameters of study – can therefore be seen to run counter to the prevailing belief that historical study cannot rely on certain consensus regarding important, and unimportant, areas of study.

R. J. Collingwood anticipated many of Carr's ideas, noting that the nineteenth century obsession with facts was giving way to a more interpretive science. This new meaning of the 'philosophy of history' largely stood as a

methodology for the research and writing of history. Collingwood argued that “ in the present case this will mean a general overhauling of all philosophical questions in the light of the results reached by the philosophy of history in the narrower sense, and this will produce a new philosophy which will be a philosophy of history in the wide sense, i. e., a complete philosophy conceived from a historical point of view”[5]. Thus, an overriding emphasis was placed on the interpreter of the events and not the events themselves. Carr largely followed in Collingwood’s footsteps by distinguishing twentieth century historiography, with its questioning of the subject’s ability to ‘ objectively’ perform the task of writing history, from its fact-obsessed, ‘ objective’ nineteenth century predecessor. A great part of Carr’s thesis was that each and every historian necessarily employs, willingly or not, a philosophy of history. The chosen methodology, interpretation, and conclusions thus merely reflect said necessity. He further noted that “ since then [the nineteenth century] we have known sin and experienced a fall; and those historians who today pretend to dispense with a philosophy of history are merely trying, vainly and self-consciously, like members of a nudist colony, to recreate the Garden of Eden in their garden suburb. Today the awkward question [as to which philosophy of history to abide by] can no longer be evaded”[6]. According to Carr, then, the possibility of objective historiography has forever been stripped of its capacity to accurately tell the tale of history. By leaving the ‘ Garden’ of facts, the modern historian must pick and choose his/her facts and then interpret them according to an overarching philosophy and perspective.

The idea of a fully self-reflexive historical process is seen by some as counter-productive. David Cannadine, for example, notes that “ history is separate from the social sciences in the sense that it is incapable of testing its theories in any kind of experimental scenario. All conjectures therefore have to be proved, or disproved, entirely in the theoretical realm”[7]. In other words, even the most stringent historical analysis is incapable of proving any absolute truth. This gives rise, for example, to the modern phenomenon of revisionist historians, who seek to go against widely accepted historical truths and to find alternative explanations for past events previously considered to be done and dusted. Cannadine goes on to argue that “ For some historians, there is an almost perverse sense of pleasure in arguing against the mainstream and seeking to re-open closed debates”[8]. This can be seen as a psychological phenomenon, with such historians keen to ensure that the idea of an ‘ unending dialogue’ is maintained in perpetuity. At the extreme end of the scale, such revisionist history encompasses views that mainstream society finds abhorrent, such as those who seek to re-evaluate events such as the Holocaust, in some cases seeking to deny that they ever happened. There are clearly numerous social and cultural factors impacting on individuals who seek to advance such arguments, but no matter how uncomfortable these views, their existence is a reminder that the ‘ unending dialogue’ referred to by Carr serves an important psycho-social purpose.

The question of why revisionist historians would seek to re-open seemingly closed debates, and overturn accepted beliefs, strikes at the heart of society’s concept of History. The lack of empirical testing for many historical

conclusions means that 'accepted history' is fundamentally a societal construct: the majority of society accepts, for example, that the Holocaust happened and that 6m people were killed by the Nazis in a series of inhumane death camps, through starvation and in some cases horrific experimentation. There is a massive amount of evidence to prove this to be the case, in terms of eye-witness testimony (from both sides), filmed evidence, and relics from the camps. In fact, accounts of the Holocaust contain no apparent contradictions that suggest any kind of historical misinterpretation is taking place. Nevertheless, a core group of revisionist historians continue to seek to deny that the Holocaust took place, or that it took place in the manner and to the extent that is commonly accepted. Since their views run counter to the mainstream, and to the plethora of evidence, it's clear that in the case of such revisionist historians, the process of historical endeavour is being subjected to other influences. Robert Eaglestone suggests that this is a case of history being subjected to "the pressures of postmodernism"[9], i. e. an innate desire to disrupt the images that underpin our understanding of this aspect of history. By going against the mass of evidence, revisionist historians are seeking to keep alive the dialogue, and the 'present-mindedness' of which Carr spoke, regardless of whether or not such an approach is warranted. In other words, whenever historical belief is formalised as received, inarguable fact, there appear historians whose sole aim appears to be to undermine any consensus. The existence of such revisionist viewpoints therefore indicates that 'present mindedness' is not only a natural part of historical endeavour, but in some cases is considered crucial.

Clearly, Carr's idea that history is an unending debate between past and present was, to an extent, a necessary corrective to the nineteenth century's die-hard emphasis on facts and empirical investigation. However, as is often the case with corrective philosophies, it's possible to argue that Carr went too far towards the other extreme. As has been demonstrated, Carr tended to focus on the utilitarian aspect of history, an approach that perversely argued for a subjective historical approach to be applied in order to create objective arguments. Carr's approach has subsequently been redefined by a number of historians, but his basic points concerning the importance of recognising the power of modern philosophy to reconfigure historical study can be seen to be still relevant to modern historical debate. As the case of revisionist historians shows, there appears to be an innate psychological desire among some historians to overturn accepted history and to defy the status quo of what can be considered as an historical fact. The extent to which this process reflects some form of deep-rooted psychological reaction against historical objectivity is unclear, but it's certainly possible to argue that such revisionism reflects – albeit in a substantially different way – the subjective historical approach envisioned by Carr. Even if a modern historian could recognise and successfully shrug off his 'present-mindedness', the process of such recognition must necessarily impact upon the historians approach to the subject. As Evans writes in his conclusions, "...whether we like it not, there is always a subjective element in historical writing, for historians are individuals, people of their time, with views and assumptions about the world that they cannot eliminate from their writing and research..."[10]. The idea that it's possible to escape the broad context of historical endeavour would, after the deliberations above, therefore seem

unlikely, in which case it's also unlikely that ' present-mindedness', as envisioned by Carr, is not a part of that context.