

# FROM CARR, THROUGH SAID, TO 1983 AND THE PRESENT

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0014. (20 April 2021)

I should have started with E. H. Carr. Or at least, I should have mentioned him at some point. Without him, all those constructions, inventions or imaginings would not have happened. In 1961 he published a small book titled *What is History?* that marked a historiographical watershed. It had some very pointed (and for some, disturbing) things to say about history and historians, about facts, about bias, about honesty, about how historians work, what they admit and don't admit to themselves and their audience, and how, ultimately, historical knowledge is produced. It counterposed its trenchant critique on all these and related points to an entire 19th century tradition of history as a supposedly 100 percent neutral, objective, purely scientific occupation.

Carr did not say, and I am not saying, that the very opposite was the case – that history was or is nothing but fiction, a pack of unreliable fantasies by people with no concern for the truth. On the contrary, just to start with the last bit, historians do (or should) dedicate themselves, then and now, to pursuing historical truth — in Leopold von Ranke's famous *wie es eigentlich gewesen* principle, to get at "things as they actually were." To that end, starting with the University of Berlin founded by Wilhelm von Humboldt, in newly introduced *Quellenkritik* (source criticism) seminars generations of Humboldt's and Ranke's followers learned about how to handle their primary sources with extreme precision and exactitude, moving from an external to an internal critique to establish the authenticity and veracity of any document. These were tremendous advances that continue to define the practice of historians to this day. At the end of the day, it remains an empirically grounded discipline. It is deductive rather than inductive. It does not start with any axioms (as in economics), but by trying to get at the "facts" — whatever they might be and however they might be constituted — and then moving up from them to broader conclusions. The aesthetics of history have changed considerably over the last two centuries. The kinds of questions that we ask of our documents (or other sources) have evolved from "history from above" to "history from below" to what we might call "history from both ends" – from legal, constitutional and political history, to economic history, to social history, to cultural history, to the history of mentalities. But the basic methodology has remained the same. Marxists, Weberians, the *Annales* School, or the Italian microhistorians have all contributed their diverse insights. They have enormously enriched our minds and expanded our horizons. Yet none of them have proposed an alternative to working through what we call "primary sources" (written or material) to solve specific research questions so as to arrive at successively better understandings of "what actually happened" in history.

But of course, documents and the “facts” that they provide (or seem to provide) do not speak for themselves. They have to be interpreted, and it is here that problems arise. History had existed for a long time (since the 5th century BC days of Herodotus and Thucydides), but together with all other disciplines, whether old or new, it, too, was redefined, systematised, and institutionalised (departmentalised) in the early-19th century. That redefinition went hand in hand with a series of separations: first from literature and philosophy (meaning especially the philosophy of history). But also from the new social sciences of economics or sociology. For Rankean empiricists these were all tainted with unfounded myths, or with excessive generalization about “laws” and hence futurology, or with theories. Instead, historians told themselves and all others that henceforth their business was to look only and only for the particular, even the unique (but how can one investigate the specific without a sense of the general, and hence comparisons within that general, they did not say). Having in this way established an ultra-positivistic, ultra-empiricistic canon 19th century historians pretended to be saying nothing but what their documents told them. Any theory, any starting hypothesis meant bringing in ideology and prejudice.

It was a double illusion. First, because of the way our minds work, it is simply impossible, in sheer practical terms, to begin with a “clean slate” (tabula rasa) without any overt or covert comparisons, theories (or fragments of theories), or any other form of “preconceived ideas.” So the question is not to deny or reject theory, but to be explicit about our assumptions, not to take them too far, and not to substitute them for direct penetration of the empirical material — in other words, to learn to use theory properly. ,

Second, this is precisely what they themselves did not do. Against all their professions of innocence, we might say with Shakespeare: The lady doth protest too much, methinks (Queen Gertrude in Hamlet, Act III, Scene II). It was an age of scientism, an age of nationalism and nation-statism, an age of Eurocentrism and Orientalism. These were the external requirements surrounding the history profession in the 19th century. How many historians (or other social scientists) recognized and did not bend to such atmospheric pressures? At the very least, they normalised and naturalised their own world nationalism, their own divine interventionism, their own Eurocentrism, their own religious or racial) sense of manifest destiny. Some (like the Prussian ultra-nationalist and ultra-statist Heinrich von Treitschke) went so far as to defend them outright. Still, all the accompanying claims of non-ideological, non-political objectivity were taken at face value were long taken at face value, while criticism came mostly from outside the profession and academia, and were also themselves frequently guilty of other forms of one-sidedness, dogmatism, false scientism and simultaneous over-politicization (as in the case Marxist attacks on “bourgeois” history and historians, with which it was difficult to find a professional common ground). Sadly, they did a lot to help relativize their own militancies.

Nevertheless, discontent kept mounting over time, breakaways and heresies multiplied, in Medieval history the Annales School moderated Marxism and put it to better use, and eventually a decisive blow came from within (British) academia in the form of a methodological statement that was not limited to this or that particular field but of general significance – in Kantian terms not a hypothetical but a categorical imperative. It fell to E. H. Carr to give classic expression to an idea whose time had come, putting everything together in mature, strong, convincing fashion in order to show that there is no such thing as a historian who does not have his/her ideo-political preferences. Of course there are the internal requirements of the discipline, but there is also its constitutive outside, including revolutionism or anti-revolutionism, or liberalism or conservatism, or exigencies of nation-building or empire-building.

Hence the entire process of knowledge-creation is not only and purely empirical research, a relationship between only the historian and his/her sources. Instead it is (at least) a triangular relationship between the historian in one corner, the evidence in another corner, and the overall ideopolitical context in the third. Your interpretations are fed not only by what you have found (or think you have found) in your documents, but also how you think (or have ben conditioned to think). So to take an example from my own research, it is not anything that Ömer Lütfi Barkan (1902-1979) found in the Ottoman archives that led him to launch a feverish argument about why the timar system was “not feudal.” In fact, contrary to most of his evidence, it was the Kemalist ideological matrix of Turkish nation-state formation in the 1930s that forced him to that verdict.

So first there was Carr (1961) to demonstrate, in general, that history books were combinations of scholarship (or scholarly findings) and ideological conditioning, and then along came Edward Said (1978) to demonstrate, in a more specific area-application, that the overlap between Oriental Studies and Orientalism conformed to the same pattern: the former was the scholarship and the latter the ideology, with the further proviso that they came together. But to go back to the beginning; does all this mean that there is no difference between writing fiction and writing history? That we are free to go wherever our fancies might take us? Not really. Our new sensibilities are there not to release us from all responsibility, but to make us more self-aware, and to put us on our guard against our own possible prejudices. It is a question of mastering our own demons instead of being seduced by them. I remember Anthony Bryer (1937-2016) quipping in one of his Byzantine seminars in Birmingham that “without documents we would all be out of a job.” Thirty years ago, when I myself criticised document-fetishism, I too did not mean that historians could do without primary sources (as some pretentious hypocrites have chosen to represent what I said), but simply that documents by themselves do not confess to “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” Not only do we have to drag it out of our sources, but also to construct it. It is a two-sided dialectic. On the one hand, the truth (of history) is elusive, the road to it tortuous, and our individual or generational conclusions always approximate, hence subject to further improvement. It is like a hyperbola’s asymptotic approach to its axes, which it never intersects, though the distance between them grows smaller and smaller. Yet if the quest is not there; if we are not committed to pursuing the reality of the past to the best of our ability, then we historians do not have a professional ethic binding us. We don’t exist as a craft guild on a universal scale. Post-truth is not for scholars. Worshipping and exonerating post-truth approaches, régimes or ideas is not for historians.

