



Twenty Years' Crisis (1919-1939)

Edward Hallett Carr

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Abstract: There are four great debates in the field of International Relations. The first debate was initiated by Thucydides' '*Melian Dialogue*' which marked the start of the realism versus idealism debate. '*The Twenty Years' Crisis*' written by E.H. Carr is an extension of the debate and he has focused on the inter-war period through the realist prism. It was written before the outbreak of the war in 1939 but loses nothing by that fact and just with minor modifications, an updated edition was released in 1946. Through his book he advanced the realist theory of international politics, as well as a critique of the utopian vision of the liberal ideas and argued that the neglect of the concept of power during the inter-war period was a major reason that put the world through another World-War. The relevance of a book is reflected by the longevity of its core idea. In this case, the contemporary relevance of the book can be assessed by reflecting on the fact that the world has witnessed two brutal world wars, a cold war, and is in the midst of another war and peace, as claimed by the idealists, is still an abstract concept. The review will be focused upon understanding the main idea of the book and assessing the key arguments presented by the writer, it will also aim to critically evaluate the idea of the text in the context of the realism versus idealism debate. Finally, it will present the contemporary relevance of this classical work by E.H. Carr.

Keywords: Realism, E.H Carr, Utopia, Great Debates, Inter-war period, Power

1. Introduction

There are four great debates in the field of International Relations. The first debate was initiated by Thucydides' '*Melian Dialogue*' which marked the start of the realism versus idealism debate. '*The Twenty Years' Crisis*' written by E.H. Carr is an extension of the debate and he has focused on the inter-war period through the realist prism. It was written before the outbreak

of the war in 1939 but loses nothing by that fact and just with minor modifications, an updated edition was released in 1946. Through his book which has now been termed a classic, he advanced a realist theory of international politics, as well as a critique of the utopian vision of the liberal ideas and argued that the neglect of the concept of power during the inter-war period was a major reason that put the world through another World-War.

His work has stood the test of time and is considered essential reading for scholars pertaining to classical realism in IR. The late political scientist Stanley Hoffman called the book the “first ‘scientific’ treatment of modern world politics.” Carr now occupies a prominent place in the pantheon of realist thinkers alongside Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hans Morgenthau. The content in the book is divided into 4 parts and has 14 chapters and concentrates on how International Relations began as a science and dwells on the topic of utopia and reality, putting forward the limitations of realism as well. The author argues that it becomes easy to pinpoint a small group of men for the catastrophe of war but to understand the underlying reasons why war broke out requires a scientific study to not make the same mistakes of the settlement of 1919 again in the future.

2. Assessment of the Book

2.1 The Science of International Politics

The first part of the book is divided into two chapters. In the first chapter, the author reflects on how IR was an alien subject for the masses and till the outbreak of WWI, it remained so. In each country, the subject of foreign affairs was narrowed to only a single aspect like in Great Britain the superiority of their navy was the concern whereas the Germans were concerned with foreign invasions. There weren't any organised studies of how states interact and no systematic discussions in the intellectual circles. The masses understood the importance of understanding and questioning the foreign policy post-WWI when the war affected the daily life of the people. The author focuses on the aspect of purpose and how aspirations overcome hard analysis. “*Purpose precedes the analysis as it is required to give its initial impulse and its direction and in any field of study in the initial stages the element of purpose overpowers the inclination of analysing facts*”. He analysed the role of utopian thought through various illustrations and argued how utopians did well in making the world aware of the problems that exist but did not provide any solutions. The dearth of solutions was due to the aspirations of the Utopians rather than backed by scientific analysis. The Utopians were focused on making

the institutes that were formed post WW1 work as according to them their failure would be disastrous. The start of another World War in 20 years brought a critical and analytical lens to the field of IR. His assessment of realism was that it focuses beyond the initial stages of aspiration and proceeds towards hard analysis, as done in every field of science. He argued for a balanced approach for a better understanding of IR as utopia is purpose and realism is observation and analysis.

2.2 The International Crisis

In the second part, the third chapter traces the evolution of utopian thought from the medieval period and how a doctrine of the “law of nature” was formed. According to him, the League of Nations was based on the one-sided intellectualism of the liberal democracies but neglected unforeseen difficulties which made failure imminent. For instance, any social order functions on a large measure of standardisation, and there cannot be different rules for different members. This standardisation was relatively easy in a community of people that conformed closely but in the case of the League of Nations, the differences in size, economy, and the power disparity made the institution unsustainable. In chapter four, the author talks about the concept of harmony of interest through both the idealists' and realists' views. Harmony of interest is possible only if people and the state submit to certain rules of conduct. Idealists argue that nations submit for the good of the community whereas the realists outrightly state that nations submit only because stronger power compels the weaker power. In chapter 5&6, the author has stated that realism emerged as a reaction to idealism. Realism evolved as it is guided by national interests and they are dynamic whereas utopianism remained static as it is rooted in a belief in an absolute ethical standard. Though his work has mainly critiqued the idea of utopianism, the author also provides the limitations of realism. Realism excludes four essential ingredients of effective political thinking: a finite goal, an emotional appeal, a right of moral judgment, and a ground for action. He puts forward the point that utopia and reality belong to two different planes that can never meet.

2.3 Politics, Power, and Morality

In chapter 7, the author notes that states must be based on some resemblance of common interest like every society. A state-like human behaviour acts upon two aspects of utopia and reality. He concludes that both the idealists and realists are wrong in their extremes, as utopian dreams that self-assertion can be eliminated from politics and wants a political system on

morality alone whereas realists treat altruism as an illusion. He ends the chapter by giving power and morality equal significance. He dispels the illusion that status quo states are less concerned with power in contrast with revisionist states that are dissatisfied with the international order and want more power. It is a clash in which ‘power politics’ is equally dominant from both sides. Thus, it will be false to present the struggle between satisfied and dissatisfied states as the struggle between power and morality. He has divided power into three categories in the international system namely military, economic, and power over opinion. The supreme importance of military power lies in the fact that every act of the state, in its power aspect, is directed to war. He described economic power as a source of political power and to gain economic strength states should maximize domestic production. At last, he described ‘Autarky’ as an instrument of political power as bullets can be substituted for dollars. In describing power over opinion, he assesses that propaganda has become a vital tool in contemporary politics to influence the opinion of large masses. Its usage has been fairly present in international agreements as well but in the age of competitive propaganda, the danger that truth will be unmasked has brought a limitation on the power over opinion. In chapter 9, the author states that modern utopian thinkers agree that international morality is the morality of the states while missing out on the discussion of the moral behaviour of the states. As far as international morality is concerned the world community is not yet powerful enough to override national interests though harmony can be achieved by the blend of morality and power. He concludes, by stating that in the international order the role that power plays is far greater than that of morality.

2.4 Law and Change

In chapter 10, the author argues that the utopians believe in the authority of natural law and are called “naturalists” whereas the realists believe in the authority of will of the state and are called “positivists”. Natural law can be invoked by both sides i.e., conservatives and revolutionaries. Conservatives invoke it to justify the existing order while revolutionaries justify it as a rebellion against the existing order. Realists do not view the law as a reflection of any fixed ethical standards, as they believe that it is built upon policy and the interest of the dominant group at any given point of time and is a weapon of the stronger. He states that the essence of law is to promote stability and maintain the existing framework of society. In chapter 11, the author argues that a status quo state asserted the unconditional validity of treaties in international law, while a revisionist state whose interests were affected by the treaty discarded

it. The viability of the treaty rests on the power position between the two parties and when the relationship alters the treaty is invalidated. In chapter 12, the problems with international law are stated, like it provides machinery for the settlement of disputes but recognises no compulsory jurisdiction. Judicial disputes can primarily be restricted to those areas where the security and the existence of the states are not threatened. In chapter 13, the author argues that the judicial process cannot function in international politics as for it to materialise both the parties have to be treated as equal and that fails to recognise the element of power. The author formulates that establishing methods of peaceful change is the fundamental problem of international morality and international politics. Utopians have the desire to eliminate the element of power and to form a process of peaceful change on a mutual feeling of what is just and reasonable. The realists have a differing view of peaceful change as they suggest that the stronger power emerges successfully from operations of peaceful change and states shall do their best to be as powerful as they can. In the concluding chapter of the book, he states that no workable international organisation can be built on a membership of various nation-states. He also states that the policy of protection of status-quo is not reasonable for the long term and there has to be a drastic change of outlook. The author also dwells on the concept of power and morality in the new international order.

3. Critical Evaluation of the Text

As Peter Wilson brings out, the publication of Carr's book was a major event in the IR literature. There were debates in the intellectual circles where some writers appreciated Carr for his work and accepted his line of reasoning while there were some who criticised and questioned his work (Wilson, 1998). Several writers have assessed that Carr's scientific pretensions were not true and he used the term 'utopia' in two different senses. On one hand, the word was used in opposition to 'realism' and to describe an ideal or a policy that can never be fulfilled whereas, on the other hand, he used it in opposition to 'reality' to describe ideas that were unreal or false. An example is given, when Carr described the supporters of the League of Nations as utopian, it is difficult to assess whether their beliefs were false or was the policy incapable of fulfilment. John Mearsheimer has also pointed out that Carr has not explored the two critical questions of realism that is why do states want power? And how much power do states want? (Mearsheimer, 2005). The idealists have argued that Carr's assertion of 'power politics' was a negative attitude that added to the rejection of permanent values. They also argue that Carr could not put out a 'constructive program' as he had no foundations to

build it on. The desire for a more perfect League of Nations was dismissed by Carr as an 'elegant superstructure'. Idealists have argued against the realist perspective of Carr's book and have furthered the first great debate in the field of IR.

4. Relevance of the Book

The relevance of a book is judged by the longevity of its core idea. E.H. Carr's book was the first 'scientific treatment' of modern world politics and paved the way to build or doffer from his ideas. As evident by the geopolitical shifts in the world, one of the reasons that the book is relevant even now is due to the enduring features of world politics that can only be understood through realism. Even though there has been globalization and the rise of non-state actors in the world, the state still remains the primary actor in the study of international relations and states still consider security in their military term to be extremely important. The sole aim of states in the modern time still rests on survival and the actions are fuelled by national interest. E.H. Carr wrote that the concept of harmony of interests is an abstract concept and an idealist thought and critiqued the League of Nations by arguing that power disparity between the members will cause its failure. The relevance of this idea can be understood by viewing the United Nation's role in today's time. The UN has failed to act against Russia even though Russia has invaded Ukraine and has initiated a war and the same institution was not able to stop the USA from invading Iraq. His idea that there is a power disparity that will cause the international institutes to fail stands true. Global organisations are still shaped by global leaders and the example of how China used its growing power in the World Health Organisation to stop the organisation's aim to find the origin of Covid-19 in China is a case in point. E.H. Carr was arguing against the prevalent thought of his time that neglected the concept of power when thinking about international politics. The end of the Cold War and the advent of a unipolar world system brought back the idealist thought but the rise of China has brought back the concept of power again. In Carr's words, the key to finding the proper combination of both utopia and reality is necessary. In the current world, the states are not moved by power calculations alone but still, power plays a far greater role than morality. States follow the codified international law but as Carr suggested the sanctity of a treaty or an international law depends on the power position between the parties and can be invalidated when the power position alters. China's growth made it react adversely to the ruling of International Court of Justice on its territorial claims in the South China Sea. Carr also notes that states always use idealistic rhetoric to justify their actions and this rhetoric cannot hide the fact that their motives are usually selfish and rooted in the concept of balance of power. The example of the USA's

‘War on Terror’ validates this argument. The US used the rhetoric of an idealist thought of the ‘War on Terror’ and used it for its self-interest by invading Iraq and Afghanistan. Thus, it can be argued that till the time states play a primary role in the arena of international politics, the work of E.H. Carr will stay relevant in the understanding of the world.

5. Bibliography

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