Chapter 1 – The Historian and His Facts

In the first chapter, Carr examines whether a neutral, objective account of history is possible. He first tells us that the question "what is history?" has been answered in different ways over the years. In the nineteenth century, the emphasis was on **collecting facts** and then **drawing conclusions** from them. This was known as the '**empiricist tradition.'**

"Facts, like sense-impressions, impinge on the observer from outside and are independent of his consciousness. The process of reception is passive: having received the data, he then acts on them."

Carr argues that this way of looking at history is fallacious. What exactly is a historical fact? According to the empiricist tradition, there are "certain basic facts which are the same for all historians and form the backbone of history." **However, Carr says it is that which the historian, from his point of view, considers important, and this is what separates it from ordinary facts of the past.** That Caesar crossed the Rubicon is treated as a historical fact, but that hundreds of thousands of people crossed it before him and have been crossing it since is not. **Therefore, an element of interpretation enters into every fact of history. The historian is necessarily selective**. "The belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy, but one which it is very hard to eradicate."

What is the criterion which distinguishes the facts if history from other facts about the past? (That it influenced the lives of so many people). Baker-mob example.

Carr then gives the example of ancient Greece. "Our picture of Greece in the fifth century BC is defective not primarily because so many of the bits have been accidentally lost, but because it is, by and large, the picture formed by a tiny group of people in the city of Athens. We know a lot about what fifth century Greece looked like to an Athenian citizen; but hardly anything about what it looked like to a Spartan, a Corinthian, or a Theban – not to mention a Persian, or a slave, or other non-citizen residents in Athens. **Our picture has been preselected and predetermined for us, not so much by accident as by people who were consciously or unconsciously imbued with a particular view and thought the facts which supported that view worth preserving."**

In the words of Professor Barraclough: **"The history we read, though based on facts, is strictly speaking, not factual at all, but a series of accepted judgments."**

Carr is equally critical of "the fetishism of documents", which went hand-in-hand with the "fetishism of facts." He says: **"the facts, whether found in documents or not, have still to be processed by the historian before he can make use of them: the use he makes of them is, if I may put it that way, the processing process."** And even the documents, as he explains in a telling example, reveal only one perspective, one point of view. Stresseman example – the documents do not tell us what happened but **what the author *thought* had happened, or what he wanted others to think. It is he himself who starts the process of selection.**

This view of history can be summed up in the words of Ranke: "simply to show how it really was."

The nineteenth century conception of history was challenged by the Italian historian Croce, according to whom: "All history is contemporary history", **meaning that history consists essentially in seeing the past through the eyes of the present and in the light of its problems, and that the main work of the historian is not to record, but to evaluate; for, if he does not evaluate, how can he know what is worth recording?** In this he was supported by Carl Becker, who said: **"the facts of history do not exist for any historian until he creates them."**

Carr goes on to describe the views of Collingwood, another proponent of this school of thought. Collingwood argues that the philosophy of history is concerned neither with **'the past by itself', nor with the historian's thought about it by itself', but with 'the two things in their mutual relations.'** This dictum reflects the two current meanings of the word 'history' – **the inquiry conducted by the historian and the series of past events into which he inquires**. The past which a historian studies is not a dead past, but a past which in some sense is still living in the present. But a past act is dead, i.e. meaningless to the historian unless he can understand the thought that lay behind it. **Hence, all history is the history of thought, and 'history is the re-enactment in the historian's mind of the thought whose history he is studying.'** The reconstitution of the past in the historian's mind is dependent on empirical evidence. **But it is not in itself an empirical process, and cannot consist in a mere recital of facts.** On the contrary, the process of reconstitution governs the selection and interpretation of the facts: this indeed makes them historical facts." According to Oakeshott: "History is the historian's experience. It is "made" by nobody save the historian to write history is the only way of making it."

Some important conclusions leading from this are:

1) **The facts of history never come to us 'pure' since they do not and cannot exist in a pure form. They are always refracted through the mind of the recorder. The first concern therefore should not be with the facts but the historian who writes them**. (Trevelyan [whig history]; Gibbon)
2) **The historian needs to have an imaginative understanding for the minds of the people with whom he is dealing, for the thought behind their acts. He must achieve some kind of contact with the mind of those about whom he is writing**. [history of English by soviets and soviets by English displays a malign, senseless and hypocritical attitude since they don't enter into minds of each other.]
3) **We can view the past and achieve our understanding of the past only through the eyes of the present. The historian is of his own age, and is bound to it by the conditions of human existence. The very words he uses – words like democracy, empire, war, revolution – have current connotations from which he cannot divorce them. The function of the historian is neither to love the past or to emancipate himself from the past, but to master and understand it as the key to the understanding of the present.**

On the other hand, some of the dangers are:
1) This is total scepticism, at the other end of the spectrum from those who believe in the pure objective truth. **It does not follow that, because interpretation plays a necessary part in establishing the facts of history, and because no existing interpretation is wholly objective, one interpretation is as good as another, and the facts of history are in principle not amenable to objective interpretation** – history not spun out of the human brain. (Very important – critique of Jenkins). [mountain from diff angles example, doesn't mean it has no shape at all or an infinity of shapes, interpretation plays a necessary part but no one inter is completely onjective]
2) If the historian necessarily looks at his period of history through the eyes of his own time, and studies the problems of the past as a key to those of the present**, will he not fall into a purely pragmatic view of the facts, and maintain that the criterion of a right interpretation is its suitability to some present purpose?**

The solution Carr proposes is a middle ground between facts and interpretation: **The historian must seek to bring into the picture all known or knowable facts relevant, in one sense or another, to the theme on which he is engaged and to the interpretation proposed.**

The historian starts with a provisional selection of facts, and a provisional interpretation in the light of which that selection has been made – by others as well as himself. As he works, both the interpretation and the selection and ordering of facts undergo subtle and perhaps partly unconscious changes through the reciprocal action of one or the other. And this reciprocal action also involves reciprocity between present and past, since the historian is part of the present and the facts belong to the past. The historian and the facts of history are necessary to one another. The historian without his facts is rootless, the facts without their historian are dead and meaningless. **See page 29**

Carr ends by proposing a new definition of history:
"History is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past."

Relation b/w historian and facts is one of give and take.

Chapter 2 – Society and the Individual

Carr aims to find out how far are historians single individuals and how far products of their society and their period, and how fare are the facts of history facts about single individuals and how far social facts. This is because **every human being at every stage of history or pre-history is born into a society and from his earliest years is moulded by that society.** The language which he speaks is not an individual inheritance but a social acquisition from the group in which he grows up. Both language and environment help to determine the character of his thought; his earliest ideas come to him from others.

Primitive man is less individual and more completely moulded by his society. These societies are more uniform and provide opportunities for a lesser diversity of people.

The historian is an individual human being. Like other individuals, he is also a social phenomenon, both the product and the conscious or unconscious spokesman of the society to which he belongs; it is in this capacity that he approaches the facts of the historical past. Great history is written precisely when the historian's vision of the past is illuminated by insights into the problems of the present. (Procession)

According to Carr, you cannot fully understand or appreciate the work of the historian unless **you have first grasped the standpoint from which he himself approached** it; that standpoint is itself rooted in a social and historical background. **The historian, before he begins to write history, is a product of history. (**Grote's History of Greece, Mommsen's History of Rome)

For example, in the nineteenth century, British historians with scarcely an exception **regarded the course of history as a demonstration of the principle of progress**: they expressed the ideology of a society in a condition of remarkable rapid progress. History was full of meaning for the British historians, so long as it seemed to be going our way; now that it has taken a wrong turning, belief in the meaning of history has become a heresy. After the First World War, **Toynbee made a desperate attempt to replace a linear view of history by a cyclical theory** – the characteristic ideology of a society in decline. Since Toynbee's failure, British historians have for the most part been content to throw in their hands and declare that **there is no general pattern at all**. Therefore, the though of historians, as of other human beings, is moulded by the environment of the time and place.

Carr goes on to add that it is the historian who is most conscious of his own situation is also more capable of transcending it, and more capable of appreciating the essential nature of the differences between his own society and the outlook and those of other periods and other countries, than the historian who loudly protests that he is an individual and not a social phenomenon. (Very important – method of achieving objectivity).

Furthermore, regarding history itself, the facts of history are facts about individuals, but not about actions of individuals performed in isolation, and not about the motives, real or imaginary, from which individuals suppose themselves to have acted. **They are facts about the relations of individuals to one another in society and about the social forces which produce from the actions of individuals results often at variance with, and sometimes opposite to, the results which they themselves intended.**

Regarding the "great men", or the outstanding individuals of each historical period, Carr says that they too are products of their society, **and it is a mistake to see them outside history, and imposing themselves on history in virtue of their greatness**. He quotes Hegel:

"The great man of the age is the one who can put into words the will of his age, tell his age what its will is, and accomplish it. What he does is the heart and essence of his age. He actualises his age."

Carr ends by saying: "History then, in both senses of the word – meaning both the inquiry conducted by the historian and the facts of the past into which he inquires – **is a social process, in which individuals are engaged as social beings; and the imaginary antithesis between society and the individual is no more than a red herring drawn across our path to confuse our thinking. The reciprocal process of interaction between the historian and his facts, the dialogue between the present and past, is a dialogue not between abstract and isolated individuals, but between the society of today and the society of yesterday. To enable man to understand the society of the past, and to increase his mastery over the society of the present, is the dual function of history."**

Carr's contribution based on empirical evidence:

1. History is a matter of numbers. Nameless individuals act more or less unconsciously, together and constituting a social force. Eg. Discontented peasants.
2. Actions of individuals have results that were not intended or desired by the actors. Eg., great depression.

Chapter 3 – History, Science and Morality

Carr provides and contends with five plausible reasons why History should not be called a science:

1) **History deals exclusively with the unique, science with the general**: Carr disagrees, saying that the **historian constantly uses generalisation** to test his evidence. For example, the Peloponnesian War and the Second World War were very different and both were unique, but the historians call them both "wars." Gibbon calls both the rise of Christianity and the rise of Islam "revolutions."
   History is concerned with the relation between the unique and the general.
2) History teaches no lessons: Carr says that the real point about generalisation is that **through it we attempt to learn from history, to apply the lesson drawn from one set of events to another set of events**: when we generalise, we are consciously or unconsciously trying to do this. He gives the examples of Ancient Rome learning from Ancient Greece, or the Russian Revolution deriving lessons from the French. He goes on to add that learning from history is never a one way process. To learn about the present in the light of the past means also to learn about the past in the light of the present. The function of history is to promote a profounder understanding of both past and present through the interrelation between them.
3) History cannot predict: Once again Carr disagrees. He says: **"The historian, as we have seen, is bound to generalise; and in so doing, he provides general guides for future action which, though not specific predictions, are both valid and useful**. But he cannot predict specific events, because the specific is unique and because the element of accident enters into it." The Historian also deals in probabilities.
4) History is necessarily subjective: The sociologist, the economist, or the historian needs to penetrate into the forms of human behaviour in which the will is active, to ascertain why the human beings who are the objects of his study willed to act as they did. This sets up a relation, which is peculiar to history and the social sciences, between the observer and what is observed. **The point of view of the historian enters irrevocably into every observation he makes; history is shot through and through with relativity.** Also, the process of observation affects and modifies what is being observed – this can happen in two ways. **The human beings whose behaviour is made the object of analysis and prediction may be warned in advance by the prediction of consequences unwelcome to them, and be induced by it to modify their actions, so the prediction, however correctly based on the analysis, proves self-frustrating. The other is that prediction may lead to actual realisation**. However, Carr counters this by saying that even modern physical scientists have now acknowledged that the process of knowledge, rather than separating subject and object, involves a measure of interrelation and interdependence between them.
5) History is involved with questions of religion and morality: Carr says that the situation of the historian is similar to that of the astronomer, who may believe in the existence of God, but not in that type of a God who can change the course of planets at will. **Similarly, the historian may believe in a God who has ordained the course of history as a whole, but not in that God who intervenes to slaughter the Amalekites or cheats on the calendar by extending the hours of daylight for the benefit of Joshua's army. Nor can he invoke God as an explanation of particular historical events.**
   As far as morality is concerned, Carr says that **it is not required of the historian to pass moral judgments on the private life of the characters in his story. The standpoints of the historian and the moralist are not identical.**
   Carr quotes Croce: "The accusation forgets the great difference that our tribunals, whether juridicial or moral) are present day tribunals designed for living, active and dangerous men, while those other men have already appeared before the tribunal of their day, and cannot be condemned or absolved twice. They cannot be held responsible before any tribunal whatsoever, just because they are men of the past who belong to the peace of the past and as such can only be subjects of history, and can suffer no other judgment than that which penetrates and understands the spirit of their work… those who, on the plea of narrating history, bustle about as judges, condemning here and giving absolution there, because they think that this is the office of history… are generally recognised as devoid of historical sense.

There is ambiguity, however, where public institutions are concerned. The historian will not pass judgment on the individual slave-owner, but this does not prevent him from condemning a slave-owning society. **To this Carr says that our moral judgments are made within a conceptual framework which is itself the creation of history. It is impossible to erect an abstract and super-historical standard by which historical actions can be judged. Both sides inevitably read into such a standard the specific content appropriate to their own historical conditions and aspirations. Historians, therefore, tend to express their moral judgments in words of a comparative nature like 'progressive' and 'reactionary' rather than 'good' or 'bad.' These are attempts to define different societies or historical phenomena not in relation to some absolute standard but in their relation to one another.** Moreover, when we examine these supposedly absolute and extra-historical values, we find that they too are in fact rooted to history. The emergence of a particular value or ideal at a given time or place is explained by the historical conditions of the place and time. The practical content of hypothetical absolutes like equality, liberty, justice, or natural law varies from period to period, or from continent to continent. Each group has its own values, which are rooted in history. Every group protects itself against the intrusion of alien and inconvenient values which it brands by opprobrious epithets. The abstract standard or value, divorced from society and divorced from history, is as much an illusion as the abstract individual. The beliefs that we hold and the standards of judgment that we set up are part of history, and are as much subject to historical investigation as any other aspects of human behaviour. Few sciences today would lay claim to total independence.

Chapter 4 – Causation in History

The first characteristic of the historian's approach to the problem of cause is that he will commonly assign several causes to the same event. **The historian deals in a multiplicity of causes.**

The second characteristic is to reduce it to order, to **establish some hierarchy of causes** which would fix their relation to one another, perhaps to decide which cause, or which category of causes, should be regarded in the last resort, or in the final analysis. **Every historical argument revolves around the question of the priority of causes.**

The historian must work through the simplification, as well as through the multiplication, of causes.

Carr then goes on to deal with the conflict between determinism and chance in history. Determinism is defined as the belief that everything that happens has a cause or causes, and could not have happened differently unless something in the cause or causes had also been different. According to Carr, everyday life would be impossible unless one assumed that human behaviour was determined by causes which are in principle ascertainable. Arguments that human actions should not be explained as they are the products of human will is fallacious. (Smith example, Page 94) **The historian believes that human actions have causes which are in principle ascertainable**. It is the special function of the historian to investigate the causes. He does not reject free will – except on the untenable hypothesis that voluntary actions have no cause.

As regards historical "accident", Carr says it is not as much accident as a collision of two independent causal chains. (See Cleopatra example on Page 99). This, however, raises a problem. How can one discover in history a coherent sequence of cause and effect, how can we find any meaning in history when our sequence is liable to be broken or deflected at any moment by some other, and from our point of view, irrelevant sequence?

Carr finds unsatisfactory the view of Marx that historical accident tends only to retard or accelerate change, not to alter it. He also finds unsatisfactory the view that accident in history is merely the measure of our ignorance. Instead, he says that as history begins with the selection and marshalling of facts by the historian to become historical facts, a **similar process is at work in the historian's approach to causes**. The causes determine his interpretation of the historical process, and his interpretation determines his selection and marshalling of the causes. **The hierarchy of causes, the relative significance of one cause or a set of causes or another, is the essence of his interpretation**. And this furnishes the clue to the accidental in history. The shape of Cleopatra's nose, Bajazet's attack of gout, the monkey bite that killed King Alexander, the death of Lenin – these were accidents which modified the course of history. It is futile to spirit them away, or to pretend that in some way they had no effect. On the other hand, in so far as they were accidental, they do not enter into any rational interpretation of history, or into the historian's hierarchy of significant causes. (Robinson example, 105).

History therefore is a process of selection in terms of historical significance. Just as from the infinite ocean of facts the historian selects those which are significant for his purpose**, so from the multiplicity of sequences of cause and effect he extracts those, and only those , which are historically significant; and the standard of historical significance is his ability to fit them into his pattern of rational explanation and interpretation**. **Other sequences of cause and effect have to be rejected as accidental, not because the relation between cause and effect is different, but because the sequence itself is irrelevant. The historian can do nothing with it; it is not amenable to rational**

interpretation, and has no meaning either for the past or the present. It is true that Cleopatra's nose, or Bajazet's gout, or Alexander's monkey-bite, or Lenin's death, or Robinson's cigarette smoking had results. But it makes no sense as a general proposition to say that generals lose battles because they are infatuated by beautiful queens, or that wars occur because kings keep pet monkeys, pr that people get run over and killed on the roads because they smoke cigarettes.

Therefore, the principle for distinguishing between rational and accidental causes is this: **the former, since they are potentially applicable to other countries, other periods, and other conditions, lead to fruitful generalisations, and lessons can be learned from them; they serve the end of broadening and deepening our understanding**. **Accidental causes cannot be generalised; and since they are in the fullest sense of the word unique, they teach no lessons and lead to no conclusions**.

Chapter 5 – History as Progress

Carr has four things to say about history as progress:

a) There is a sharp distinction between progress and evolution, between biological inheritance and social acquisition. Evolution by inheritance has to be measured in millennia, or in millions of years, whereas progress by acquisition can be measured in generations. **History is a progress through transmission of acquired skills from one generation to another.**

b) Progress does not have a finite beginning or an end.

c) **Progress does not advance in a straight, unbroken line.** There are often regression. Civilisations which contributed most to progress in one era might not in another, ostensibly because they will be too deeply imbued with the traditions, interests and ideologies of the earlier period to the demands and conditions of the next period.

d) **Progress in history, unlike evolution, rests on the transmission of acquired assets**. These assets include both material possessions and the capacity to master, transform and utilise one's environment.

Carr goes on to talk about objectivity in history. The subject and object should not be put asunder; rather, their complex interrelation should be realised. **The facts of history cannot be purely objective, since they become facts of history only in virtue of the significance attached to them by the historian. Objectivity in history cannot be an objectivity of fact, but only of relation, or the relation between fact and interpretation, between past, present and future**.

The absolute in history is not something in the past from which we start; it is not something in the present, since all present thinking is **necessarily relative**. **It is something still incomplete and in the process of becoming – something in the future towards which we move, which begins to take shape only as we move towards it, and in the light of which, as we move forward, we gradually shape out interpretation of the past.** It rejects the relativist view that one interpretation is as good as another, or that every interpretation is true in its own time and place, and it provides the touchstone by which our interpretation of the past will ultimately be judged. It is this sense of direction in history which alone enables us to order and interpret the events of the past and to liberate and organise human energies in the present with a view to the future. But the process itself remains progressive and dynamic. **Our sense of direction, and our interpretation of the past, are subject to constant modification and evolution as we proceed.** (Marxist methodology critique).

When we praise a historian for being objective, therefore, it is not that he simply gets his facts right, but rather that he chooses the right facts, applies the right standards of significance. Calling a historian objective means two things: **First of all, we mean that he has a capacity to rise above the limited vision of his own situation in society and in history. Secondly, he has the capacity to project his vision in to the future in such a way as to give him a more profound and more lasting insight into the past than can be attained by those historians whose outlook is entirely bounded by their own immediate situation**. **Therefore, more than being a dialogue between the past and the present, history is a dialogue between the past and progressively emerging future ends.**

History acquires meaning and objectivity only when it establishes a coherent relation between past and future. (Bismarck example – page 130, and the benefit of hindsight).