

# How convincing is E. H. Carr's critique of utopianism?

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The task of this paper is to examine whether or not E. H. Carr's realist account of international relations is more able to explain the behaviour of international actors in the international system than its inter-war liberal institutionalism. The latter is arguably the inter-war mainstream school of thought at the time of his writing *The Twenty Years' Crisis* and as such this contribution of his to the study of international relations has utopianism as the main target. It is tempting to argue that Carr's realist arguments are more, or less, convincing than utopianism in the wider context of international affairs as to its structure and the behaviour of states. Yet, this approach will negate from the conception that both schools of thought offer alternative ideas over how to regard the real world. As such an analysis cannot be detached from the overarching discourse which is changed over time by the rhetorical and political power of ideas that can be mobilised to create new normatively informed social orders.[1] These conceptions and discourse are, like Carr's realist critique and utopianism, different sides of the same coin. To address the question, this essay will take into consideration the notion that Carr's realist critique is a function of the existing discourse, and that such validity resides in the 'interplay between utopian and realist accounts'.[2]

The arguments against Carr's critique are made on utopian grounds. One of the most controversial aspects of *The Twenty Years' Crisis* is what Norman Angell called 'moral nihilism'[3]. This refers to Carr's view that the primacy of politics over ethics, which refers to the application of morality, results in rational, voluntary obligation of the minority to submit to the rules imposed by the stronger majority for fear of more disagreeable compulsion.[4] There is no universal morality in the international sphere because theories of international morality are the function of dominant nations or groups of nations.[5] With respect to Carr's description of historical process that theory comes after practice, during the interwar period the utopian call for the system of international law and organisations was nothing more than a fig leaf to cover the Great Powers' desire to maintain their status quo by moulding the discourse that the First World War was the breakdown of diplomacy. Nevertheless, this argument can be refuted on the grounds that the state behaviour reflects morality of man.[6] Carr's realist critique therefore amounts to man's lack of progress in moral sense. With the creation of the system of collective defence materialised in the form of NATO for instance, albeit short of universal collective security, it would seem that Carr has underestimated progressive change in human conscience. The utopian's 'peace through law' approach[7] by means of the League of Nations and its imposition of Germany's reparations was to legitimise the victors' utopian norms on universal rule of law and mask their true aim to maintain the Great Power status quo. While it is true that human being has the ultimate goal of self-preservation, that does not necessarily preclude the possibility of co-operation in particular when common interests can be established. Carr, instead, refused to admit that a political cause can be 'better' than another[8] and that institutions have the potential to mould individuals to conform to a particular norm for the future great good. On this account, Carr's realist critique on moral considerations is under attack on empirical and theoretical grounds.

Another point related to the aforementioned discussion is a larger question of what Carr has understood as realism and utopianism. Carr used the term utopia in two significantly different senses, the first of which is the opposition to reality and the other is that to realism.[9] In other words, Carr was unclear to distinguish between what is false and what is ideal. His failure to 'demonstrate why the objectives and policies of the League were impossible of attainment'[10] questions his stance as a realist and thus the credibility of his arguments. Either way, that the utopian values i.e. law, order and peace do not exist in reality and the impossibility to attain them suggests that there can be no harmony of interests. Nevertheless, he later adopted a position that there were, after all, certain mutual international interests[11] and war was a result of the breakdown of the harmony of interests. In essence, his

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approach to explore the interplay between realism and utopianism blurred the line of distinction between the two schools of thought. His realist account cannot explain the cause and effect of the course of history. It cannot account for the breakdown of inter-war utopianism in the form of another total war. It is questionable whether the war broke out because realist elements of power politics and lack of international morality masked by liberal institutional thought were determined to give rise to conflicts up until 1939, or because those values were simply too ideal.

On the other hand, it is precisely his approach of exploring between bipolar extremes that renders his realist account more eclectic and more convincing. It can be argued that Carr's critique might not have sufficiently accounted for actual conflicts that already broke out. And yet this does not necessarily and sufficiently lead to an outright rejection that his account cannot explain potential international relations phenomena. A virtue of theories is their ability, as paradigms, to collectively speculate what might have happened and what might occur. In fact, his emphasis on the role of power in politics has implications on morality and his view on human nature which makes man react to other in two opposite ways.[12] Crucially, the argument for Carr's realist critique as a convincing account lies in his moderation in accepting that utopia and reality, and morality and power are both necessary ingredients blended together. This is true in both practical and theoretical aspects. In politics, neither power nor morality can be ignored.[13] In this vein, Carr criticises utopianism by adding realist elements to it, and in the chapter on the limitations of realism he even admits that pure realism can offer nothing but a struggle for power which makes any kind of international society impossible. In practice and in theory there still exists the need for building a new utopia by taking into account realism.[14] What therefore matters is to strike the balance between utopianism and realism and this concerns his view on historical process. The implication which can be derived from *The Twenty Years' Crisis* is that history has its own dynamic, and the interplay between utopia and reality is the driving force underpinning that dynamic. The cause and effect of the course of history is, hence, not pre-determined or immutable.

Another point which renders Carr's critique valid is his conception of the importance of economics in the political domain. The economic and the political are separate yet interdependent. Whereas the currency in the interactions in the international system is power, the place of morality as laid out in a discourse, such as why nations should succumb to the system of international law, is determined by the 'Haves'. The Haves powers are in the position to determine the degree of the mixture between utopia and reality and to put it into practice, such as the League of Nations, which commands the Have-nots to regard it as a normative standard i.e. as what should morally be created. Revisionism after the First World War occurred as the Have-nots sought to posit that the utopian world outlined by the victors was a discourse too ideal and false since the latter's aim was simply to punish the defeated. Moral relativism arguably better suits Carr's account than moral nihilism since the place of morality is not absolute but rather relative depending on from whose perspective it is conceived.

In conclusion, it is simplistic to either single out one argument from *The Twenty Years' Crisis* and criticise its validity or read through the whole volume and criticise his inconsistency and seeming confusion as the argument is developed. Yet the appraisal Carr's realist arguments deserve corresponds with his Hegelian approach of analysis by moving to and fro before reaching an ultimate antithesis. In this sense mere utopia or reality alone is a necessary but in itself insufficient condition for analysing Carr's conception of utopianism and realism. Ultimately Carr's realist critique of utopianism is convincing because of the limitations of realism which he himself recognises and reconciles with his conception of utopia. The strength of realism lies in exposing the weakness of utopian thought. It is also noteworthy that realism and utopianism *per se* can be interpreted differently and the interplay between the two thinking suggests that each term has no absolute position. In the final analysis, this essay asserts that Carr's realist critique of utopianism is convincing as long as the analysis of the former is not detached entirely from the latter. Mere realism on its own definitely does not suffice to explain the complexity of real-world phenomena and, after all, Carr is a utopian realist.

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[1] B. Buzan, 'From International system to International Society: Structural Realism and Regime Theory Meet the English School.', *International Organization* 47(3), Summer 1993, p.329-330.

[2] M. Cox, 'Introduction', in E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p.xxi.

[3] P. Wilson, 'Responses to The Twenty Years' Crisis', in *E. H. Carr: A Critical Appraisal*, ed. M. Cox, (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p.166.

[4] E. H. Carr, op.cit., p.42-43.

[5] Ibid, p.74

[6] This further corresponds to K. N. Waltz's arguments of the first and second images put forward in *Man, the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1954).

[7] H. Suganami, 'The "Peace through Law" Approach: A Critical Examination of Its Ideas', in *Approaches and Theory in International Relations*, ed. T. Taylor, (New York, Longman, 1978), p.100-121.

[8] A. Zimmern, 'A Realist in Search of Utopia', *Spectator*, 24 November 1939, p.750.

[9] P. Wilson, op.cit., p.177.

[10] L. Woolf, 'Utopia and Reality', *Political Quarterly* 11(2), April-June, 1940, p.172.

[11] P. Wilson, op.cit., p.179.

[12] E. H. Carr, op.cit., p.91.

[13] Ibid, p.92.

[14] Ibid, p.87.

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