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Appearance and Reality in World Politics: E. H. Carr's *The Twenty Years' Crisis*

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If successful prediction or policy prescription were the hallmarks of analytical distinction in the field of International Relations (IR) it is doubtful whether *The Twenty Years' Crisis* would presently see much light of day. The chief policy recommendation of the book, appeasement, had been abandoned—at least with regard to Germany—long before the book went into print in September 1939. With the onset of war the benefit of the doubt Carr gave to Hitler and the harshness of his judgments against President Wilson and a procession of Western statesmen soon began to look rash and ill-judged. By the end of the war the death knell he sounded for nationalism, national self-determination, the small state, free trade and laissez-faire, all of which he felt had been rendered obsolescent by the rise of combination, concentration, and large-scale social and economic planning, was already sounding faint. It would soon be all but muffled by a Bretton Woods system characterised by pegged but adjustable rates of exchange and a commitment to progressively and multilaterally reduce barriers to trade; a Marshall Plan predicated on the need for greater international, and especially transatlantic, capital mobility; and a United Nations with a large and expanding membership of primarily new and

small states with the commitment to 'self determination of peoples' enshrined in its Charter. Carr's prediction of the domination of world affairs by six or seven 'agglomerations of power' with a socialist Britain heading the Western European agglomeration also did not come to pass. A kind of socialism prevailed in Britain from 1945-1979, but it was one so circumstantially contingent and so riddled with pragmatic compromises as to be barely worthy of the name. Britain's leadership of Europe was never a serious proposition given her imperial preoccupations, continental suspicions, Westward inclinations, and catalogue of economic woes. In fact Carr's reading of the near-future of foreign affairs and the structure of world politics is fascinating for what it gets wrong more than for the little it gets right. And if not precisely in the way Carr envisaged it, his preferred policy of appeasement not only failed but became associated with the very utopianism he sought to disparage.

Fortunately, however, IR is not a policy science. While there are those who believe that scientific methods can be used to good effect in the study of international relations, and those who engage in policy debates and make policy suggestions based on their specialist knowledge, IR is best thought of not as a science, nor even an academic discipline, but as a socio-intellectual space. This space has been developing largely organically for about a century, and within it a wide variety of conversations now take place, some concerned with policy, some method, some explanation, some prediction, some normative issues. The vast majority of them, however, revolve around the question: how best can we go about explaining or understanding relations

between the political communities and other significant actors that engage in politics beyond the borders of our own community, within that arena that we variously call the international/world/global system/society. The very catholicity of the socio-intellectual space called IR is one of the reasons why *The Twenty Years' Crisis* is still widely read and avidly discussed today. While it can in some respects be viewed as a period piece—and it still finds a prominent place in inter-war History courses, particularly those focussing on the politics of appeasement—it is a work of such wide intellectual range, thematic grandeur, and breadth of vision, that it retains the capacity to inspire a wide variety of contemporary theorists. Realists, critical theorists, historical materialists and English school theorists have all been inspired by his ideas and have seen him as a trail-blazer of their particular portion of the IR socio-intellectual space. If this space had remained the narrow one—the study of the political relations of states—recommended by some of its pioneers it is doubtful that *The Twenty Years' Crisis* would have been appreciated in quite the way it is today. Yes, it would be seen as a classic of power analysis, a seminal work that reasserted the perennial importance of the independent power of the nation-state. But the subtleties of the book, Carr's radicalism, utopianism, and historicism, would be confined to the sidelines—as they are, largely, in one of the most widely cited articles on Carr written by one such pioneer.[1]

The reasons for the classic status of the book are widely understood. *The Twenty Years' Crisis* is a counter-hegemonic text, indeed the most

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[1] Hedley Bull, '*The Twenty Years' Crisis* Thirty Years On', *International Journal*, 24, 4 (1969), 626-38.

successful counter-hegemonic text in the field—more successful than those

towering books of more recent times, *Theory of International Politics* and

Social Theory of International Politics, both of which have had a major impact

on theoretical debates, but neither of which have provoked a disciplinary

paradigm shift. The impact of *The Twenty Years' Crisis* may not have been as

devastating to received wisdom as it is sometimes made out to be[2], but there

is no question that it profoundly altered the outlook and basic assumptions of

the succeeding generation of IR scholars. For these scholars—e.g. Martin

Wight, Hedley Bull, Joseph Frankel, Susan Strange, Hans Morgenthau,

Nicholas Spykman, John Herz—the liberal internationalist, progressivist,

League-orientated (and for Carr 'utopian') outlook and assumptions of the first

generation of IR scholars—the likes of Alfred Zimmern, Philip Noel-Baker,

Gilbert Murray, Arnold Toynbee, Pitman Potter, James Shotwell, Frederick

Sherwood Dunn—were not only dated and questionable, but parochial,

intellectually shallow, and wrong. Carr successfully demonstrated to them that

'the intellectual theories and ethical standards of utopianism, far from being

the expression of absolute and *a priori* principles, are historically conditioned,

being both products of circumstances and weapons framed for the

furtherance of interests.'[3] The bankruptcy of utopianism resided 'not in its

failure to live up to its principles, but in the exposure of its inability to provide

any absolute and disinterested standard for the conduct of international

affairs'.[4] The supposedly absolute and universal principles of the utopian were

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[2] Many of the 'utopians' Carr criticised carried on writing in much the same liberal internationalist vein. See Peter Wilson, 'Carr and his Early Critics: Responses to *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, 1939-46', in M. Cox (ed.), *E. H. Carr: A Critical Appraisal* (London: Palgrave, 2000), 165-97.

[3] E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1939), 87.

[4] Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, 111

not principles at all 'but the unconscious reflexions of national policy based on a particular interpretation of national interest at a particular time'.[5] And what were these theories, standards, and principles? Most straight-forwardly: collective security[6]; disarmament[7]; free trade[8]; the indivisibility of peace[9]. But more complexly: the idea that theory creates practice and that 'political theory is a norm to which political practice ought to conform'[10]; the notion that power is a product of morality and that politics can be made to conform to an independent ethical standard[11]; the belief that the good life, internationally, is a question of right reasoning, that the spread of education will enable people to reason rightly, and that everyone that reasons rightly will necessarily act rightly[12]; the corresponding belief that war results from a failure of understanding, and that the spread of education will lead to peace[13]; the belief that through the League and other international bodies power could be eliminated from international politics and 'discussion substituted for armies and navies'[14]; and belief in the neutrality of international law and the possibility of 'dissolving' politics into law (through arbitration, adjudication, etc.).[15] Carr convinced this influential post-war generation of scholars, in other words, that power, appearances sometimes to the contrary[16], is 'a decisive

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[5] Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, 111.

[6] Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, 13-14, 20-21, 139-44

[7] See e.g. Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, 25, 94-6, 177-78.

[8] See e.g. Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, 56-61, 69-77.

[9] See e.g. Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, 67-9.

[10] Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, 17.

[11] Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, 28.

[12] Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, 34-6.

[13] Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, 35-6, 67.

[14] Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, 131-39.

[15] Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, 104-6, 232-63.

[16] See especially in this connection Carr's penetrating analysis of Locarno, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, 135-37.

factor in every political situation'. To ignore it was 'purely utopian'.[17] He convinced them that law and order, collective security, disarmament, the indivisibility of peace, free trade were, in the inter-war period, little more than the slogans of privileged groups. They were not universal interests or principles but the ideology of satisfied classes and nations the function of which was to preserve their privileged position in an age when objective conditions were no longer conducive. Unknown to itself, utopianism became the tool of vested interests. International morality, as expounded by the utopians, became 'little more than a convenient weapon for belabouring those who assail the *status quo*'.[18] It was not that assertions of the universal value of peace, security, law, order, morality, were always invalid, but one had to look for the interests that lay behind them, the ideological purposes that they always to some extent served.[19] The scepticism of these scholars to the liberal vision of a more rational, harmonious, progressive international order is largely rooted in Carr—though it is fair to say that while they accepted his Marxist-inspired critique[20] of the materially conditioned nature liberal thought, they extended their scepticism to Carr's own vision of a progressive socialist, collectivist and functionalist world order.[21]

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[17] Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, 301.

[18] Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, 187.

[19] For an analysis of Carr's understanding of 'utopianism' and its impact in IR see Peter Wilson, *The International Theory of Leonard Woolf: A Study in Twentieth Century Idealism* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), ch.2; Lucian Ashworth, *International Relations and the Labour Party: Intellectuals and Policy Making from 1918-1945* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 9-27.

[20] In his superb biography of Carr, Jonathan Haslam asserts that 'Carr could never truly be called a Marxist' (*The Vices of Integrity: E. H. Carr, 1892-1982* (London: Verso, 1999), 54). This may be true, but as Carr later acknowledged, in the 1930s he did 'a lot of reading and thinking on Marxist lines. The result was *The 20 Years' Crisis*…not exactly a Marxist work, but strongly impregnated with Marxist ways of thinking, applied to international affairs (Carr, 'An Autobiography', in Cox (ed.), *Carr: A Critical Appraisal*, xix).

[21] On which see e.g. Peter Wilson, 'The New Europe Debate in Wartime Britain', in P. Murray and P. Rich (eds.), *Visions of European Unity* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996), 41-6;

Secondly, *The Twenty Years' Crisis* was not only a remarkably successful counter-hegemonic text it was 'the first "scientific" treatment of modern world politics'.[22] Hoffmann's quotation-marks signal the problematic nature of this term. Yet there can be no doubt that Carr's book investigated a range of questions, concerning the nature and role of power, morality, law, and change in international relations, in a systematic and critical way that marked a distinct break with the past. Though Carr may have overstated the case in Part One of the book ('The Science of International Politics') there can be no doubt that the prevailing ethos in the young field of IR was that of the missionary not the scientist. Some substantial empirical work had been done in the field, e.g. on public international unions, on the growth of international cooperation, on the arms trade, and on nature and role of the League of Nations[23], but even this work had a transparently teleological and normative purpose. The focus was not on 'what is, and why' but 'how can things be made better'. While eschewing crude empiricism ('political science is the science not only of what is, but of what ought to be'[24]) Carr demonstrated that far greater attention needed to be given to explanation of 'what is' before the important task of determining 'how can things be improved' could be begun. The 'utopians' were discussing colour schemes and soft furnishings before the foundations of the house had been laid. Far more work needed to be done

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[22] Stanley Hoffmann, 'An American Social Science: International Relations', *Daedalus*, 106, 4 (1977), 43.

[23] See e.g. Paul S. Reinsch, *Public International Unions* (Boston, Ginn and Company, 1911); L. S. Woolf, *International Government: Two Reports* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1916); Philip Noel-Baker, *The Private Manufacture of Armaments* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1936); Alfred Zimmern, *The League of Nations and the Rule of Law* (London: Macmillan, 1936).

[24] Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, 7.

on the foundations of IR before the 'elegant superstructure' of this or that preferred world order could be properly built.[25]

These are the two prime reasons why Carr's book is regarded as a classic in the socio-intellectual space that is IR. It was the first successful counter-hegemonic book, and in this regard it bears comparison with *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, if not *Origin of Species*, *Das Kapital*, and *The Interpretation of Dreams*—works that not only had a disciplinary impact but were epoch-making. It was, in addition, the first book to grapple with a range of general international matters in the spirit of science—in the spirit, that is, of detached enquiry stripped of the liberal rationalist teleology that subconsciously infused virtually all works on the subject of the period. This is not to say Carr did not have a concept of progress. In some visceral respects he was a product of the Victorian age in which he was born and the Victorian curriculum (narrow, patriotic, classical) that he was fed at Merchant Taylor's and Cambridge[26]. He fell out of love with and into contempt for liberalism in the 1920s[27], but not the notion of progress. Rather he substituted 'the planned society' for the liberal *laissez faire* conceptions of natural harmony and spontaneous order of his youth.

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[25] Could this metaphor (see Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, 307) have influenced the naming of C.A.W. Manning's 'The Structure of International Society', which remains to this day the core first year course of the BSc International Relations at LSE? Carr's emphasis on the need to understand the elementals of world politics—the basic relationships between sovereignty, power, law, morality, and order—strongly influenced Manning.

[26] Towards the end of his life he confessed to his friend Tamara Deutscher, 'I remain a good Victorian at heart'. Quoted in Haslam, *Vices of Integrity*, 9.

[27] See Haslam, *Vices of Integrity*, chs. 2-3; Michael Cox, 'Introduction', Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, Reissue (London: Palgrave, 2001), xiv-xix.

But the point here is that he sought to root his own admittedly utopian agenda firmly in the soil of international reality.[28] More precisely he observed in that reality the shoots of a new kind of social and political order, and saw it his job as a historian/political scientist[29] to help bring it about. So the 'hard ruthless analysis of reality' that he considered the 'essential ingredient' of the science of international relations,[30] was the analysis of a reality the substance of which was already settled in his mind—partly 'observed' for sure, but at least as much confirmed or normatively willed into existence. His method was much influenced by Marx and Mannheim.[31] Far from proceeding inductively, Carr's science of international relations was built around an understanding of history as a struggle between haves and have-nots, conditioned by the social and economic circumstances of the times, but one in which the notion of progress was never entirely absent. His sense of the pervasiveness of power in social life acquired from twenty years in the Foreign Office never succeeded in obliterating his belief that progress, although often paradoxical or contradictory, was the normal condition of history and that Man retained the capacity to use his reason to shape history towards progressive ends.[32] It is for this reason that while one finds in *The Twenty Years' Crisis* the hard, ruthless, unsentimental analysis of later American realists, and much of the cynicism, one finds none of the pessimism. Carr's realism is of a very different

[28] 'This [his socialist vision], too, is utopia. But it stands more directly in the line of recent advance than visions of a world federation or blue-prints of a more perfect League of Nations' (Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, 307).
[29] It is not at all clear from Carr's pages that he would recognise such a distinction, except in an entirely formal sense.
[30] Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, 13-14.
[31] For the influence of Mannheim see Charles Jones, *E. H. Carr and International Relations: A Duty to Lie* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), ch.6.
[32] This is palpable in Carr's *Conditions of Peace* (London: Macmillan, 1942) and *The New Society* (London: Macmillan, 1951) but also strong in the final chapter of *Twenty Years' Crisis*.

kind to that of the realists he is generally associated[33]—though material to superficially support such an association can easily be found.

The Twenty Years' Crisis is far from a flawless work. Some have called it a polemic.[34] Over the years it has been criticised for its moral relativism, its misrepresentation of various ideas and views, its inconsistent use of terms (particularly 'utopia' and 'reality'), its prescriptive unhelpfulness, and its totalitarian implications—and by writers across the political spectrum, from fellow socialists such as Crossman and Woolf, to liberals such as Angell and Hayek, and conservatives such as Wight and Morgenthau.[35] The theoretical coherence of the book can be questioned[36], and Carr was certainly not above using the 'extraordinary dexterity with which he could deploy the English language'[37] to get himself out of more than one philosophical tight corner.[38] But virtually all of the critics have, if sometimes begrudgingly, noted the

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[33] See, further, Jones, *Carr and International Relations*, ch. 7; Michael Cox, 'Will the real E. H. Carr Please Stand Up?', *International Affairs*, 75, 3 (1999), 643-53; Peter Wilson, 'Radicalism for a Conservative Purpose: The Peculiar Realism of E. H. Carr', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 30, 1 (2001), 123-36; Seán Malloy, *The Hidden History of Realism: A Genealogy of Power Politics* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), ch. 3.

[34] See e.g. Andreas Osiander, 'Rereading Early Twentieth-century IR Theory: Idealism Revisited', *International Studies Quarterly*, 42, 3 (1998), 410; Duncan Bell, 'Political Theory and the Functions of Intellectual History: A Response to Emmanuel Navon', *Review of International Studies*, 29, 1 (2003), 154-5.

[35] See e.g. Wilson, 'Carr and his Early Critics', 165-83; R. H. S. Crossman, *The Charm of Politics and Other Essays in Political Criticism* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1958), 91-4; Leonard Woolf, 'Utopia and Reality', *Political Quarterly*, 11, 2 (1940), 167-82; Norman Angell, 'Who are the Utopians? And who the Realists?', *Headway*, January 1940, 4-5; F. A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1986 [1944]), 138-41, 169-72; Martin Wight, 'The Realist's Utopia', review of *Twenty Years' Crisis* (2nd edn.), *Observer*, 21 July 1946, 3; Hans Morgenthau, 'The Political Science of E. H. Carr', *World Politics*, 1 (1948-49), 127-34.

[36] See e.g. Susan Stebbing, *Ideals and Illusions* (London: Watts and Co., 1941), 6-18; Michael Joseph Smith, *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), ch. 4.

[37] Haslam, *Vices of Integrity*, 7.

[38] Note here the clever ways in which Carr modified his support for appeasement and his attribution of blame to the 'satisfied powers' in the second edition of the book. See Michael Cox, 'From the First to the Second Edition of *The Twenty Years' Crisis*: A Case of Self-censorship?', in Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, Reissue, lxxii-lxxxii. Note also Jones' judgment (*Carr and International Relations*, 46ff.): 'The book is treacherous: its rhetoric is complex and its true intentions are never clearly or fully disclosed'.

brilliance of the book, its enduring ability to provoke fresh thought, its capacity to challenge not only conventional assumptions but the very vocabulary of our understanding. In this respect it is the first genuinely critical work of IR. I will leave the last words on *The Twenty Years' Crisis* to one of my current MSc students, a History graduate who knew nothing about Carr and his reputation in IR until arriving at the LSE: '…clearly the work of some kind of genius'.[39] This is true.

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[39] David Lloyd, IR410 'International Politics' Essay 1.