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The Twenty Years' Crisis by Edward H. Carr

If asked to list the major classics of International Relations off the cuff, few informed students would fail to mention E. H. Carr's *The Twenty Years' Crisis*. Carr's book occupies a special place in the field of IR for two reasons. On the one hand, it greatly contributed to the establishment of the latter as an autonomous discipline. On the other hand, this book represents one of the founding texts of classical realism.

Completed shortly before the outbreak of World War II – as the author himself remarks in the preface to the first edition, the manuscript was sent to the press in mid-July 1939 – *The Twenty Years' Crisis* grew out of Carr's dissatisfaction with two opposite trends developed in the study and practice of international politics after the Great War, namely utopianism and "extreme" realism. The former originated from philosophical liberalism and gained popularity in the first decade after WWI. Among its tenets one finds the view of man as a "good" being and of humankind as united by a substantial harmony of interests; the belief in natural law; a trust in the salutary effect of public opinion on politics. On the practical side, the major products of this way of thinking were the League of Nations and the liberal international economic

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system. For Carr, it was exactly the fate of these two liberal institutions that uncovered the weaknesses of the utopian approach. In the author's view, the political and economic events occurring in the 1930s Europe showed that principles like the universal interest in peace or the benefits of open markets were plainly wrong or, at best, dependent on a distribution of power favoring the *status quo* countries (Britain and the US at the time).

Carr's emphasis on power in international politics, however, does not preclude him from disagreeing with those who take this realist principle to its extremes. By looking at politics as a constant quest for supremacy in which imagination does not play any role, and considering morality as always relative and functional to interests, the kind of realism developed in the 1930s made utopianism's opposite mistake: it offered an analysis totally devoid of purpose. Eager to propose a completely pragmatic approach to politics, these "heirs of Machiavelli" had relinquished any emotional appeal, finite goal, or ground for ethical judgment. For Carr this is simply unacceptable.

How, then, should one look at world politics? Carr expounds his theory of international relations in the second half of the book. As mentioned, the author sees power as the main driving force of international politics. No interaction in the international arena can be well understood without reference to the selfish nature of states, to their lust for influence and to the conflictual character of politics. Power, in turn, can be military (the most important, since the possibility of war is always present), economic, or ideological ("over opinion").

Yet power is not the only force at work in the international arena. Unlike

the "extreme" realists, Carr believes that morality plays a role in politics. The ethics he talks about, however, is not embodied in the abstract code of the utopian philosopher. It is rather a "realistic" morality, reflected in the actual behavior of the states who recognize each other as members of the same community with similar goals and "feelings". True, this morality has important limitations (most notably the concern for self-preservation), but denying it any function in politics would be incorrect: man can be sociable as well as egoistic.

Edward H. Carr

This search for the "golden mean" between sheer power and morality characterizes also Carr's analysis of international law. States, Carr argues, do not obey the law because it is "good" or out of pure imposition. They do so because law gives certainty and regularity to an order that reflects both the systemic distribution of power and the consent of its participants. In this view, the main challenge for a system undergoing a redistribution of power is to transform its legal order peacefully while sticking to its main moral principles. This challenge was lost on September 1, 1939.

Like other classics of IR, *The Twenty Years' Crisis* is a complex book despite its simple structure. Two aspects of this complexity are worth noting. First, Carr's arguments concern the method of International Relations as well as its substance. As seen, Carr's attack on utopianism and "extreme" realism involves not only views of the human nature and of the essence of politics, but also the relationship between pragmatism and ethics in the study of politics.

Not surprisingly, then, his middle ground theoretical solution leaves some room for interpretation as regards the place of "purpose" in the "analysis". Second, although Carr's aim is not to narrate the history of the inter-war international system, he is not interested in pure theory either. For one thing, unlike many of his intellectual heirs, the author refrains from transforming his arguments into universally applicable mechanical models. In addition, Carr believes that theory and history can never be completely separated. Political thought is rooted in politics and is a form of political action. Theories attempt to solve the problems of their time. In this view, *The Twenty Years' Crisis* was an important contribution in an epoch in desperate need for answers. Unfortunately it was not enough to prevent the coming tragedy.

In sum, far from being a "one time" reading, *The Twenty Years' Crisis* is a book that deserves periodical re-examinations. At each review, the reader will achieve a better grasp of Carr's messages and a clearer understanding of international politics.