

The myth of the 'First Great Debate'

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The story of international relations (IR) is conventionally told in terms of a series of 'great debates'. The first 'great debate' was the so-called idealist- or utopian-realist debate which took place in the late 1930s and the early 1940s. It was triggered by a number of 'real-world' events—Manchuria, Abyssinia, the failure of the League, Munich, the slide into war—but most importantly by the publication of E. H. Carr's *The Twenty Years' Crisis*. This book, it is said, had a devastating impact on the discipline. Idealism, the predominant mode of thinking about international relations, was revealed as 'bankrupt', 'sterile', 'glib', 'gullible', a 'hollow and intolerable sham'.¹ The rout, indeed, was so complete that some authors have contended that it led to a Kuhnian-style paradigm shift: idealism, the normal mode of enquiry, was thrown into a state of 'scientific crisis', particularly by the 'anomaly' of World War Two, the occurrence of which it was utterly unable to explain; realism, Carr's alternative scientific standpoint, offered not only a cogent explanation, but also the prospect of accurate prediction and effective policy prescription. It soon replaced idealism as the 'normal science' of the field.²

The argument of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it contends that, in the sense of a series of exchanges between interlocutors holding opposing 'idealist' and 'realist' points of view, the first great debate never actually occurred. As a pedagogic device for bringing order to a bewildering array of theories and approaches—the menu for choice—that IR has on offer, the notion of a 'first great debate' is not without merit. But as a statement of historical fact it is highly misleading. Secondly, it contends that in the sense of a cohesive, and certainly self-conscious, school of thought, an 'idealist' or 'utopian' paradigm never actually existed. 'Idealism'/'utopianism' turns out, on analysis, to be Carr's clever device for discrediting a whole range of things he happened to disagree with. It is a realist category of abuse. Its subsequent popularity—for reasons of both ideological and intellectual convenience—has had an inhibiting effect on disciplinary development. In brief, a rich variety of progressivist ideas have been consigned to oblivion as a result of an uncritical acceptance—and, indeed, a less than subtle reading—of Carr's rhetorically powerful text.

¹ E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1939), pp. 49, 52, 80, 93, 110–11, 118.

² John Vasquez, *The Power of Power Politics: A Critique* (London: Frances Pinter, 1983), pp. 13–19.

Responses to Carr

The publication of Carr's book was a literary event of no small importance. It received reviews in all the main newspapers and journals. It produced a flurry of correspondence. It even provoked the writing of several books. There were many references to Carr's wit, intellectual vigour, and the brilliance of his achievement. The economist, Friedrich Hayek, newly ensconced at the London School of Economics, described Carr as a man of 'considerable intellectual distinction', a 'sincere', 'gifted', and 'disinterested' scholar.³ Arnold Toynbee, one of Carr's chief utopian targets, described him as 'a man of very great ability, with a powerful and trenchant mind'.⁴ The Fabian writer and resident of Bloomsbury, Leonard Woolf, agreed: Carr was an 'acute' and 'trenchant' thinker with an 'unusual capacity for historical impartiality'.⁵ Fellow man of the Left and future Labour Minister, Richard Crossman, considered Carr's analysis of the utopians a 'brilliant success'. 'With admirable dexterity,' he said, 'he picks up Professors Zimmern and Toynbee as though they were delicate butterflies, and pins them on his board. And there, when his task is finished, is a perfect collection of the fauna of English international thought in the first quarter of the twentieth century.'⁶ A *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer considered the book one of 'capital importance . . . as profound as it is provocative . . . Few can be unaware of the need for the fresh and fearless thinking which Professor Carr brings to an urgent task.'⁷ The praise of the American political scientist, William Maddox, was even higher: it was, he extolled, a 'monument to the human power of sane and detached analysis . . . utterly devoid of national bias . . . a compound of much human wisdom . . . one of the most significant contributions to the systematic study of the theory of international politics . . . in years'.⁸ Even Carr's *bête noir*, Norman Angell, conceded that 'Professor Carr does a public service in compelling those whom he terms the Utopians to take stock of their beliefs.' Indeed, he praised Carr's chapter 'on the relation of law to peaceful change' as a 'brilliant and most useful piece of work'.⁹

Such praise, however, formed only the preface to the far-reaching criticisms, doubts, and disagreements which almost invariably followed. Angell berated the book as 'completely mischievous a piece of sophisticated moral nihilism'. It was an attempt to justify 'do-nothingism' and 'over-caution'. Carr's theory that law, order, and peace were not general interests but merely the particular interests of the rich and the powerful gave 'aid and comfort in about equal degree to the followers of Marx and the followers of Hitler'. Moreover, if true it provided a 'veritable gold mine' for Dr Goebbels. His disparagement of reason, law, liberty, and other ideals for which Britain fought amounted to pessimism and defeatism.¹⁰

³ F. A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (London: Ark, 1986 [1944]), pp. 137–8.

⁴ Toynbee to Angell, 23 January 1940, Ball State University, Angell MS, Correspondence.

⁵ Leonard Woolf, 'Utopia and Reality', *Political Quarterly*, 11 (2) (April–June, 1940), p. 171.

⁶ R. H. S. Crossman, 'The Illusions of Power' (review of Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*), *New Statesman*, 18, 457 (25 November, 1939), pp. 761–2.

⁷ Review of Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, *Times Literary Supplement* (11 November 1939), p. 650.

⁸ William P. Maddox, review of Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, *American Political Science Review*, 34 (3) (1940), pp. 587–8.

⁹ Norman Angell, *Why Freedom Matters* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1940), p. 47.

¹⁰ Angell to Noel-Baker, 12 December 1939. Ball State University, Angell MS, Correspondence; Angell to Zimmern, October 1939. Bodleian Library, Zimmern MS, 45; Angell, 'Who are the Utopians? And who the Realists?', *Headway* (January 1940), 5; Angell, *Why Freedom Matters*, pp. 37–65.

Angell was not alone in finding Carr's moral stance disturbing. Zimmern felt that the many good things that Carr had to say were ultimately undermined by his 'thorough-going relativism'. The strength of the attack on absolute values, Zimmern contended, had always resided in demonstrating that values 'drawn from a deeper realm' had been misapplied, *not* in denying their existence. But if it was true that no such values existed—'if justice and liberty, courage and self-sacrifice, mercy and decency, right and wrong [were] only matters of ephemeral convention'—then the student of international relations was left in a state of 'blank frustration'. How could he find the necessary courage and determination to build something that was 'no more than a temporarily plausible conclusion'? The values required to promote the good life as it could be lived under twentieth-century conditions could not be evoked, he insisted, 'by running away from the notion of good because it is liable to misuse by the ignorant, the muddle-headed and the ill-intentioned or by refusing to admit that one foreign policy or one national tradition or one political cause can "better" than another'.¹¹

Toynbee expressed a similar view. Carr, he said, was 'a consummate debunker', and if debunking were all that one needed his book would have been a 'very important contribution to the study of recent international affairs'. But debunking, however necessary and salutary, was only the preface to the real job, not the job itself. Carr left one 'in a moral vacuum and at a political dead point'. Debunking was barren unless it led 'to a clearer view of what is morally right and wrong and what is politically destructive or disastrous'.¹²

R. W. Seton-Watson concurred, if not quite with his fellow historian's *sang-froid*. It was, he exclaimed, 'incredible' that in Carr's 'long and brilliantly reasoned' chapter on morality, the Church and the issue of religion did not arise once. Carr's assertion that, whatever the moral issue, the clash between the satisfied and the dissatisfied Powers was one in which power politics were equally predominant on both sides, was one that amounted to 'pagan negation'. It was just this negative attitude coupled with his rejection of permanent values which dominated the whole book. Not surprisingly, when it came putting forward a 'constructive programme', Carr had no foundations on which to build. World federation and 'a more perfect League of Nations' were dismissed as 'elegant superstructures'. The movement for an international union of democracies was dismissed in a single sentence. The cause of small states was implicitly abandoned as hopeless. And all Carr offered in their place was vague assertions about 'digging foundations', 'economic reconstruction', and 'the frank acceptance of [the subordination of] economic advantage to social ends'.¹³

Richard Crossman strongly commended Carr's exposure of the 'liberal or utopian fallacy' of the sovereignty of law, morality, and the popular will, and their 'airy neglect' of the significance of power. He similarly praised Carr's account of the enervating effect of utopian ideology on the will of the victorious Powers, who instead of using their power in defence of the *status quo*, or for the accomplishment of peaceful change, engaged in 'unilateral psychological disarmament'. But *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, as with that other masterpiece of power analysis, *The Leviathan*, led to practical conclusions that were already out of date by the time they

¹¹ Alfred Zimmern, 'A Realist in Search of Utopia' (review of Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*), *Spectator* (24 November 1939) p. 750.

¹² Toynbee to Angell, 23 January 1940. Ball State University, Angell MS, Correspondence.

¹³ R. W. Seton-Watson, 'Politics and Power', *Listener*, 7 December 1939, Supplement 48.

were made. Carr's exposure of utopianism had led him to 'whole-hearted' support of appeasement, and the 'realistic' admission that since the balance of power had shifted, way must be made for Hitler. But this was to assume that Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia were nation-states on the nineteenth-century model, and that Hitler was simply a 'modern Bismarck'. Such an assumption, however, was an 'illusion as profound as that of Professors Zimmern and Toynbee'. In Crossman's view, the paramount fact of the age was the transformation, not only of nineteenth-century ideologies, but of nineteenth-century power. Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia were not simply new versions of the old model, but 'new forms of political and economic organisation which threaten to supersede the old order of national sovereignty'.¹⁴

Several commentators took particular umbrage at Carr's scientific pretensions. Woolf argued that Carr's principal concepts were ambiguous, and that no enquiry could be considered scientific if it rested on such insecure conceptual foundations. His whole argument rested on the distinction between 'utopia' and 'reality'. But Carr failed to make the distinction clear. In particular, he consistently used the term 'utopia' in two very different senses. On the one hand, he used it in opposition to 'realism', i.e., to describe a hope or an ideal or a policy 'incapable of fulfilment'. On the other hand, he used it in opposition to 'reality', i.e., to describe ideas and beliefs that were 'unreal' or 'false'. Thus, when Carr described the liberals of the nineteenth century and the supporters of the League of Nations as utopian, it was not clear whether he meant that their beliefs were false, or that their policies were impossible of attainment. Carr had a good deal to say about the falseness of their beliefs, 'but he never clearly demonstrates . . . why their objectives and policies were impossible of attainment'.¹⁵

In particular, Carr often implied that the failure of the League to maintain peace was 'inevitable' simply because it had failed. 'The first and most obvious tragedy of this utopia', Carr asserted, 'was its ignominious collapse.' Woolf angrily denounced this view as 'vulgar' and 'false'. Failure was not *ipso facto* ignominious. Nor was it true that just because the League failed, it was bound to fail. There was a striking inconsistency in Carr's logic: after all, Chamberlain's policy of appeasement had failed but this did not lead Carr to the conclusion that it was utopian; nor indeed that its failure was 'ignominious'. Similarly, Hitler's policy of creating a new European order based on German supremacy would fail, but neither did Carr view this as utopian.

In one of the most trenchant contemporary critiques of Carr's thesis, philosopher Susan Stebbing, of the University of London, also took issue with the way Carr used his principal words. 'Morality', for example, was a key term in Carr's vocabulary. Yet he never stipulated precisely what he meant by it. He sharply opposed it to 'power'. Pairs of opposites were then utilised throughout the text as corresponding synonyms of morality and power: conscience, coercion; goodwill, enmity; self-subordination, self-assertion; altruism, self-seeking; utopia, reality. These pairs of opposites clearly illustrated the nature of the confusion into which Carr had fallen. Morality sometimes meant 'a system of moral rules', sometimes 'conscience', sometimes 'altruism', sometimes 'benevolence'. But its meaning was never definite.

¹⁴ Crossman, 'Illusions of Power', pp. 761–2.

¹⁵ Leonard Woolf, 'Utopia and Reality', *Political Quarterly*, 11, 2 (April–June, 1940), p. 172.

Furthermore, by equating morality, conscience, goodwill, *etc.*, with utopia, and power, coercion, enmity, *etc.*, with reality, Carr created the impression that whereas the latter were significantly 'real', the former were importantly 'unreal'.

This in Stebbing's view was manifestly incorrect. Power was not the only reality. Men's ideals and values were also factors in determining social change. Indeed, Carr recognised this in the latter part of his book. He claimed, *inter alia*, that morality and power, utopia and reality, altruism and self-seeking, were 'dual elements present in every political society':

The state [Carr said] is built up out of these two conflicting aspects of human nature. Utopia and reality, the ideal and the institution, morality and power, are from the outset inextricably blended in it . . . The utopian who dreams that it is possible to eliminate self-assertion from politics and to base a political system on morality alone is just as wide of the mark as the realist who believes that altruism is an illusion and that all political action is based on self-seeking . . . The attempt to keep God and Caesar in water-tight compartments runs too much athwart the deep-seated desire of the human mind to reduce its view of the world to some sort of moral order. We are not in the long run satisfied to believe that what is politically good is morally bad; and since we can neither moralize power nor expel power from politics, we are faced with a dilemma that cannot be completely resolved. The planes of Utopia and reality never coincide. The ideal cannot be institutionalized, nor the institution idealized.

For Stebbing this was an extraordinary conclusion to what was offered as a 'scientific' analysis. Since Carr presented power and morality as contradictions it followed that power could no more be moralised, nor morality made powerful, than black whitened and white blackened. This was no 'iron necessity' of history, or the nature of states, but a direct consequence of the way Carr used his words. The statement 'the ideal cannot be institutionalized' was a parallel truism. Since 'ideal' was equated with 'utopia', and 'utopia' meant 'imaginary, impracticable, ideal', it followed that the ideal could not be institutionalised *by definition*. The assertion concerning the utopian 'dream' of a political system based on 'morality alone' was problematic for the same reason. It was, moreover, difficult to believe that any scientifically minded professor could deliberately use 'morality' and 'imaginary ideals' as synonyms.¹⁶

Some of the strongest criticism, however, came from Hayek. Carr was one of Hayek's chief 'totalitarians in our midst': benign and well-intentioned on the outside, but on the inside, totalitarian to the core. Perhaps more than anyone else, in Hayek's view, Carr illustrated the extent to which the disparagement of the individual and the ideal of liberty—in the name of 'maximum efficiency', the 'big state', the 'national plan', and 'scientific organisation'—had gone in formerly liberal England. Following the German 'historical school' of realists, Carr asserted that morality was a function of politics, that the only standard of value was that of fact, that the individualist faith in human conscience as the final court of appeal was utopian, and that the 'old morality' of abstract general principles must 'disappear' with the arrival of a new empiricism which treated concrete cases on their individual merits. In Carr's world nothing but expediency mattered. Even the rule *pacta sunt servanda* was a matter not of principle but of convenience. That without such abstract general principles, merit became a matter of arbitrary opinion, and without

¹⁶ L. Susan Stebbing, *Ideals and Illusions* (London: Watts and Co., 1941) pp. 12–16; Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, pp. 124–5, 129–30.

a rule making them morally binding, treaties became meaningless, did not seem to worry him.

Indeed, Carr sometimes gave the impression that Britain had fought the last war on the wrong side. 'Anyone who re-reads the statements of British war aims twenty-five years ago and compares them with Professor Carr's present views', Hayek asserted, 'will readily see that what were then believed to be the German views are now those of Professor Carr who would presumably argue that the different views then professed in this country were merely a product of British hypocrisy.' How little difference Carr was able to see between the ideals held in Britain and those practised in present-day Germany was illustrated by his assertion that

[i]t is true that when a prominent National Socialist asserts that 'anything that benefits the German people is right, anything that harms them is wrong' he is merely propounding the same identification of national interest with universal right which has already been established for English-speaking countries by [President] Wilson, Professor Toynbee, Lord Cecil, and many others.

In addition, did Carr realise, Hayek asked, that his assertion that 'we can no longer find much meaning in the distinction familiar to nineteenth century thought between "society" and "state"', was precisely the doctrine of Carl Schmitt, the leading Nazi theoretician of totalitarianism, and the essence of the definition of that term that Schmitt himself had invented? Similarly, did he realise that the view that 'the mass production of opinion is the corollary of the mass-production of goods', and that 'the prejudice which the word propaganda still exerts in many minds to-day is closely parallel to the prejudice against control of industry and trade', was really 'an apology for a regimentation of opinion of the kind practised by the Nazis'?¹⁷

A 'First Great Debate'?

This brief account of the many responses to the publication of *The Twenty Years' Crisis* shows that although the work is generally considered to have had a devastating effect on the 'utopian' thinking of the inter-war period, the 'utopians' themselves did not feel particularly devastated by it. The general view, from 'utopians' and non-'utopians' alike, was that Carr was a brilliant and clever fellow, but that he had used his cleverness for certain disreputable, perhaps even diabolical, purposes. Questions were raised about the moral implications of the text, its prescriptive value, its claim to scientific status, and its likely effect on practical politics. The answers given were almost entirely negative.¹⁸

To my knowledge Carr never issued a rejoinder. Nor did any other 'realists' (on the identity of whom Carr was remarkably silent). Indeed, those later associated with political realism who themselves responded to Carr's book, shared many of the same doubts as the 'idealists'. Hans Morgenthau, it is true, considered Carr's work 'a contribution to political thought of the first order'. It provided 'a most lucid and brilliant exposure of the faults of contemporary political thought in the Western

¹⁷ Hayek, *Road to Serfdom*, p. 139; Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, p. 100.

¹⁸ For a fuller account see my 'Carr and his Critics: Responses to *The Twenty Years' Crisis*', in Michael Cox (ed.), *E. H. Carr: A Critical Reappraisal* (London: Macmillan, forthcoming).

world'. But in exposing the defects of this thought, he felt, it also exposed its own share in them. The fundamental problem in Carr's work was a philosophical one. He set out to discover a new morality in the political world. But he was equipped with only the vaguest notion of what morality meant. The 'philosophically untenable equation of utopia, theory, and morality', which lay at the foundation of *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, lead 'of necessity to a relativistic, instrumentalist conception of morality'. Morality merely became 'an escape from the logical consequences of realism, which, once it is achieved, must once more be attacked with instruments of realism'.¹⁹ Consequently, Carr had 'no transcendent point of view from which to survey the political scene and appraise the phenomenon of power'. The 'political moralist' thus transformed himself into a 'utopian of power'. Whoever held superiority of power of necessity became the repository of superior morality as well. Power thus corrupted not only the actor on the political scene, 'but even the observer, unfortified by a transcendent standard of ethics'.²⁰

Martin Wight expressed similar concerns. Carr had sought to build his science of international relations around the antithesis of what he called utopia and reality. 'Every political situation', Carr had claimed, 'contains mutually incompatible elements of utopia and reality, of morality and power.' But the balance, Wight felt, was not maintained, and the book lacked the 'fruitful tension' of Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. Carr, indeed, was 'at his weakest' when dealing with the principles of political obligation, and the very choice of the word 'utopia' to describe the ethical side of politics 'itself shows the questions that the argument is going to beg'. Carr's book was thus 'brilliant', 'provocative', but also 'unsatisfying'. 'The student could have no better introduction to the fundamental problems of politics,' he concluded, 'provided always that he reads it side by side with Mr. Leonard Woolf's deadly reply in *The War for Peace*'.²¹

To the extent, therefore, that Carr set a debate in motion, it was not exclusively an idealist–realist debate, but also a realist–realist debate. Furthermore, to the extent that the radical proposals for change set out in the final chapter of *The Twenty Years' Crisis* can be regarded as 'utopian' (on which, more in a moment) it was also a utopian–utopian debate. The notion of a 'first great debate' between an idealist–utopian camp and a realist camp does little to convey, therefore, the richness and the complexity of the responses and the exchanges that actually took place (the hyperbole of the adjectives only heightening the magnitude of the distortion).

It is also worthy of note that although Carr did not issue a formal rejoinder, his subsequent work, *Conditions of Peace* especially, can be seen as a reply to his critics in its eagerness to begin the work of construction following the demolition-job of *The Twenty Years' Crisis*. There are, indeed, plenty of indications that Carr took his critics, or at least some of them, seriously. His remarkably sudden abandonment of the twin conceptual pillars of his science of international relations—'utopia' and 'reality'—in all his subsequent works, can be seen as a response, at least in part, to those critics who skilfully revealed the fragility of such a structure. His emphasis in *Conditions of Peace* on the 'great social revolution' of the twentieth century—a

¹⁹ The words are Carr's.

²⁰ Hans Morgenthau, 'The Political Science of E. H. Carr', *World Politics*, 1 (1) (1948–9), pp. 127–34.

²¹ Martin Wight, 'The Realist's Utopia' (review of *Twenty Years' Crisis*, 2nd edn), *Observer* (21 July 1946), p. 3. See also C. A. W. Manning's typically barbed review of Carr's *Conditions of Peace* in *International Affairs*, 19 (8) (June 1942), pp. 443–4.

revolution, essentially, of large-scale social and economic organisation of which totalitarianism, Bolshevism, the Nazi revolution, and the two world wars were symptoms—can be seen as a response to Crossman's attack on his static, largely state-centric, concept of power in *The Twenty Years' Crisis*.²² The final chapter of Carr's *The New Society* entitled 'The Road to Freedom', with its emphasis on positive 'social and economic' freedoms as opposed to negative political freedoms, can be seen as a direct response to Hayek's fierce assault on him in *The Road to Serfdom*.²³

The manufacture of idealism

Disciplinary self-consciousness began in 1972. There are few intimations of such consciousness in Waltz's *Man, the State, and War* or Butterfield and Wight's *Diplomatic Investigations*. A veritable explosion of interest in the growth of the discipline—its schools, debates, 'defining moments', and trends—occurred in the 1980s.

The heuristic and pedagogic value of this development is undeniable. It has not only enabled students and scholars of the subject to get their intellectual bearings in an expanding and increasingly complex field, it has also provided an important means of self-criticism. One less agreeable feature, however, is that it has led to the ossification of a category of thought that until that time had been treated by many with a degree of caution, even scepticism. Idealism, which all now agree constituted the first, somewhat disreputable, phase of the subject, has been taken out of the inverted commas given to it by the author of 'The Theory of International Politics, 1919–1969', the first important article on its history,²⁴ and has become a normal, unproblematic, term of art alongside realism, behaviouralism, pluralism, structuralism, and other widely accepted categories. The problem with this, as Bull was aware, is that idealism is a negatively loaded term *par excellence*: it suggests unworldliness, impracticality, perhaps even woolly mindedness and untruth (the positively loaded term realism, on the other hand, suggesting worldliness, practicality, strong-mindedness, and truth). In addition, it is not a term that those supposedly offending from such traits themselves accepted. But rather a term, like impressionism in the art world or mercantilism in the world of political economy, imposed on a group of supposedly like-minded individuals by opponents bent on discrediting them.

The caution with which a so-called idealist 'school', 'paradigm', 'phase', or 'stage' has to be treated is betrayed by the astonishing array of characteristics that have been imputed to it in the aforementioned historiographical literature. Idealists, it is said, believed in progress, free will, reason, the primacy of ideas, and the malleability

²² E. H. Carr, *Conditions of Peace* (London: Macmillan, 1942). See also Hidemi Suganami, *The Domestic Analogy and World Order Proposals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 101–5; and Peter Wilson, 'The New Europe Debate in Wartime Britain', in Philomena Murray and Paul Rich (eds.), *Visions of European Unity* (Boulder CO: Westview, 1996), pp. 41–52.

²³ E. H. Carr, *The New Society* (London: Macmillan, 1951), pp. 100–19.

²⁴ Hedley Bull, 'The Theory of International Politics, 1919–1969', in Brian Porter (ed.), *The Aberystwyth Papers: International Politics 1919–1969* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 30–55.

(perhaps even the perfectibility) of human nature. They believed that morality was absolute and universal, and that politics could be made to conform to an ethical standard. They asserted that in modern society war had become obsolescent, and that growing interdependence would render it obsolete. They believed in a harmony of interests between nations, actual or potential, the foundations of which being variously attributed to capitalism, socialism, free trade, self-determination, and the discovery that in modern societies self-interest lies in cooperation. They argued that war was a product of imperfect institutions, the balance of power, the international anarchy, nationalism, prejudice, ill-will, ignorance, miscalculation, and the machinations of sinister interests; that its elimination was practicable, perhaps immanent; that this achievement would be hastened by the spread of democracy and the growth of international law and organisation; and that the duty of the scholar was to educate the masses in peace and internationalism. They also advocated, as a means to peace, disarmament, collective security, world government, open diplomacy, freedom of the seas, the abolition of alliances, arbitration, mediation, 'peaceful change', decolonisation, self-determination, social and technical cooperation, and the creation of an international police force. They have been held guilty of innocence, moralism, superficiality, parochialism, legalism, optimism, pessimism, manichaeism, and eclecticism. They have also been charged with being the unwitting exponents of the special ideology of the satisfied Powers.²⁵

This inventory of characteristics is far from exhaustive. It is sufficient to show, however, that if there is such a thing as an idealist paradigm or school of thought it is an exceedingly broad one. Indeed, if there is anything which binds these views and beliefs together into what remotely might be called a paradigm or a school of thought it is the assumption that conscious, progressive change is possible in international relations. Idealism becomes voluntarism plus progressivism in the international field. Indeed, as I have pointed out elsewhere,²⁶ this is the definition implicitly given to idealism by one of its foremost students. In an influential article J. H. Herz equated idealism with a breathtaking array of other 'isms': universalism; cosmopolitanism; humanism; optimism; liberalism; socialism; pacifism; anarchism; internationalism; 'idealist nationalism'; and chiliasm.²⁷

²⁵ Bull, 'Theory of International Politics', 33–6; J. E. Dougherty and R. L. Pfaltzgraff, Jr., *Contending Theories of International Relations: A Comprehensive Survey*, 2nd edn (New York: Harper Row, 1981), pp. 4–6, 84–5; Vasquez, *Power of Power Politics: A Critique*, pp. 13–19; Michael Banks, 'The Evolution of International Relations Theory', in Michael Banks (ed.), *Conflict in World Society: A New Perspective on International Relations* (Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1985), pp. 2–21; Trevor Taylor, 'Utopianism', in Steve Smith (ed.), *International Relations: British and American Approaches* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1985), pp. 92–107; Michael Joseph Smith, *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1986), pp. 54–67; Charles W. Kegley, Jr. and Eugene R. Wittkopf, *World Politics: Trend and Transformation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), pp. 12–15; Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 10–22; Ken Booth, 'Security in Anarchy: Utopian Realism in Theory and Practice', *International Affairs*, 67 (3) (1991), pp. 527–545; William Olson and A. J. R. Groom, *International Relations Then and Now: Origins and Trends in Interpretation* (London: Harper Collins, 1991), pp. 46–134; Torbjörn L. Knutsen, *A History of International Relations Theory: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), pp. 184–207, 268–70.

²⁶ 'The Twenty Years' Crisis and the Category of "Idealism" in International Relations', in David Long and Peter Wilson (eds.), *Thinkers of the Twenty Years' Crisis: Inter-War Idealism Reassessed* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 13–14.

²⁷ J. H. Herz, 'Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma', *World Politics*, 2, 2, (1950), pp. 157–80.

As well as the palpable absurdity of lumping together such disparate doctrines as socialism, anarchism, and chiliarism in the same category,²⁸ there are two connected problems with this formulation. Firstly, 'realism', the generally accepted (and in many accounts *definitional*) opposite of 'idealism', becomes an exceptionally bleak and deterministic doctrine. It becomes the doctrine that progress never has occurred and never can in international relations, and that the application of reason, except in a day to day, narrowly instrumental, managerial sense, is pointless. International relations become the realm of recurrence and repetition and international theory becomes the theory of survival. There are in fact few 'realists' who uphold this view. Perhaps only the Martin Wight of 'Why is there no International Theory?' and the Kenneth Waltz of *Theory of International Politics*. Secondly, because of the loaded nature of the terms 'idealism' and 'realism', purposeful, progressive, change automatically becomes associated with unworldliness, impracticality, and untruth (and fatalism, international *stasis*, human impotence, with worldliness, practicality, and truth). In a century which has seen the rapid growth of international organisation, the emergence of a complex network of international regimes governing trade, finance, and the environment, the establishment a universal code for the promotion and protection of human rights, the deligitimisation of empire as a mode of political organisation, and the forging of a new kind of pacific international union in a formerly war-torn part of the world, this is a remarkable state of conceptual affairs.

If we take the recent historiographical literature as our guide, therefore, we are forced to the conclusion that the distinguishing feature of 'inter-war idealism' is the belief or assumption that conscious, progressive change is possible in international relations: that 'the world does not have to look like the one we are familiar with' and that through reason, courage, imagination, and determination it may be possible 'to arrive at a better way of being and living'.²⁹ What explains this remarkable sweeping away of such a wide variety of ideas and beliefs into a single category pejoratively labelled idealism?

A large part of the answer lies in the influence of E. H. Carr. *The Twenty Years' Crisis* is a brilliant essay in criticism, and a work of considerable literary merit. But it is also a polemical work, as Carr himself came close to admitting in the preface to the second edition.³⁰ After all, Carr did not set out coolly and dispassionately the central tenets of the utopian school, and then proceed, equally coolly and dispassionately, to demonstrate their shortcomings. Rather he built up a picture impressionistically, sometimes by explicit assertion but often by inference and insinuation. In addition, it is difficult to separate Carr's explication of utopianism from his critique of it: there is a sense in which utopianism is a doctrine defined by its defects.

The list of assumptions, ideas, and beliefs condemned by Carr as utopian is in some ways more extensive than the one given above. According to Carr, utopians believed that the purpose of the study of international relations was to find a cure for war (p. 11); that the task of the student of international relations was to convert everyone to his desires (p. 13); that reality could be radically transformed by an act

²⁸ This is not to say that disparate doctrines can never have anything in common. But that is different to saying that such doctrines are themselves part of a broader one.

²⁹ The phrases are from Booth, 'Security in Anarchy', p. 535.

³⁰ '... some passages of *The Twenty Years' Crisis* state their argument with a rather one-sided emphasis which no longer seems as necessary or appropriate to-day as it did in 1939.'

of will (pp. 16–17); that political theory is a norm to which political practice ought to conform (p. 17); that enlightenment and progress could be achieved through reason (p. 34); that human conscience is the final court of appeal (p. 32); and that the same code of morality is applicable to states as to individuals (p. 194). They believed that war was largely due to the control of foreign affairs by diplomats (p. 24); that public opinion, if allowed to make itself effective, would in itself be sufficient to prevent war (pp. 34–5); that war results from a failure of understanding and that the spread of education would therefore lead to peace (pp. 35–6); that there was no necessary incompatibility between nationalism and internationalism (p. 60); that national self-determination was the key to world peace (p. 60); that there was no necessary incompatibility between the economic good of individual nations and the economic good of humanity as a whole (pp. 56–61); that every nation had an identical interest in peace (p. 67); that war had become useless as proven by the experience of 1914–1918 (p. 67); that the creation of the League would lead to 'the elimination of power from international relations and substitution of discussion for armies and navies' (p. 132); and that the League was the expression of 'the organised opinion of mankind' (p. 177). They also recommended, as a means to peace, collective security, world government, disarmament, free trade, the legal prohibition of war, 'all-in arbitration', world federation, a United States of Europe, a 'more perfect League of Nations', and the creation of an international police force.

Again, this list is not exhaustive, but it is sufficient to show the inclusive nature of Carr's concept of utopia. It is not so much a carefully defined scientific concept, as a highly convenient rhetorical device. This is nowhere better illustrated than the range of actual persons, the thinkers and statesmen, that Carr condemns as utopian. Those he explicitly so condemns are actually few in number, and fairly homogeneous: President Wilson; Norman Angell; Alfred Zimmern; Arnold Toynbee; Robert Cecil; Nicholas Murray Butler; John Dewey; and the international lawyers, Hersch Lauterpact and Leon Duguit. But those he *implicitly* so condemns are much more numerous, and remarkably heterogeneous: Presidents Taft and Roosevelt, and Secretaries of State Stimson and Hull (for believing that public opinion will always prevail and can be trusted to come down on the right side); David Lloyd George (for believing the same with respect to the issue of disarmament); Anthony Eden (for echoing the Mazzinian doctrine of a pre-ordained division of a labour between nations, each with its special contribution to make to the welfare of humanity); Winston Churchill (for failing to recognise the interested character of his denunciations of, first, the Bolsheviks and, later, the Nazis); the *Times*, Cecil Rhodes, W. T. Stead, Arthur Balfour, Presidents McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt (for assuming that the national interests of their countries were synonymous with the universal good); Bernard Bosanquet (for separating politics from economics); Frederick Schuman (for doing the same); Karl Marx (usually quoted approvingly for his realism but in one instance (pp. 148–9) quoted disapprovingly for being dominated by the nineteenth-century presupposition that economics and politics were separate domains); Gilbert Murray (for harbouring the 'illusion' that certain disputes are *ipso facto* judiciable and others *ipso facto* non-judiciable); Hans Kelsen (for entertaining the 'dream' of a tribunal 'exercising not only the judicial function of interpreting the rights of states, but the legislative function of changing them'); Lord Davies (for entertaining the same).

The ideological and rhetorical nature (and, indeed, utility) of one of Carr's two key concepts could hardly be clearer: utopia is a weapon framed for the furtherance of Carr's preferences; an ingenious device for belabouring those who failed to assail the *status quo*.³¹

The influence of Carr on later accounts of inter-war 'idealism'/'utopianism' is unmistakable, both in terms of the nature of this putative doctrine and the attitude generally displayed towards it. But in one key respect later accounts have departed from Carr's account, and it is this difference which explains the emergence of an implicit definition of idealism as general as 'belief that conscious, progressive change is possible in international relations' (and the bleak corollary that realism means conscious, progressive change is impossible).

Carr did not believe that such change was impossible. The author who affirmed that 'the clash of interests is real and inevitable' (p. 77), that 'politics is not a function of ethics, but ethics of politics' (p. 82), and that 'there can be no reality outside the historical process' (p. 85), was also the author who advocated 'free housing, free motor cars, and free clothing' as part of a social programme of 'economically unremunerative expenditure' (pp. 304–5), who called for the extension of such a social programme beyond the national frontier (pp. 306–7), and who advocated 'practical international co-operation'—involving 'far-reaching schemes of international public works'—as a 'psychological substitute for war'.³² The author who condemned a United States of Europe as a 'purely utopian project' (p. 39) was also the author who proposed the creation of a whole range of European institutions including a European Relief Commission, a European Transport Corporation, a 'Bank of Europe', and, overseeing them all, a European Planning Authority (the 'master-key to the problem of post-war settlement').³³ The author who branded utopianism as 'bankrupt', 'sterile', 'glib', 'a hollow and intolerable sham', was also the author who declared that 'any sound political thought must be based on elements of both utopia and reality' (p. 118), that realism which ignores the element of morality in international relations is an 'unreal kind of realism' (p. 302), and that peaceful change (surely not an exclusively 'utopian' concept?) 'can only be achieved through a compromise between the utopian conception of a common feeling of right and the realist conception of a mechanical adjustment to a changed equilibrium of forces' (p. 284).

There is a radical agenda in *The Twenty Years' Crisis* (and transparently in later works) which many of Carr's critics at the time, wilfully or not, failed to detect, and which has gone almost wholly unnoticed in post-war accounts of his contribution to the discipline. As David Long has observed, Carr's realism was a product of his radicalism:³⁴ a product of his broadly Marxist, certainly dialectical materialist, conception of the historical process. The slayer of utopianism and champion of

³¹ It will be remembered that, in two of the most important passages in *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, Carr said: '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' (p. 87); and that '[i]nternational morality, as expounded by most contemporary Anglo-Saxon writers, is now little more than a convenient weapon for belabouring those who assail the *status quo*' (p. 187).

³² E. H. Carr, *Conditions of Peace* (London: Macmillan, 1942), pp. 236–75.

³³ Carr, *Conditions of Peace*, pp. 242–70.

³⁴ David Long, 'Inter-war Idealism, Liberal Internationalism, and Contemporary International Theory', in Long and Wilson, *Thinkers*, p. 310.

realpolitik was certainly no conservative. It was not change *per se* which he branded utopian; nor conscious, progressive change; but large-scale constitutional blue-prints for change: the drawing up of covenants and charters and the signing of pacts. In Carr's view, peace could not be achieved by states simply avowing not to resort to war. Rather, the social and economic conditions needed to be right: hence the title of his largely ignored, but in many ways most accomplished work, *Conditions of Peace*. Change, in Carr's view, needed to be substructural rather than superstructural, social and economic before legal and political.

This is the key point of departure between Carr's account of 'utopianism' and later accounts, and along with the general failure to appreciate the radicalism in Carr, the cause of this departure resides in widespread misunderstanding of his position on what he called the 'doctrine of the harmony of interests'. Belief in such a harmony has often been advanced as a key characteristic of utopianism. But this was not Carr's view. Carr did not object to the notion of a harmony of interests *per se*, but to the nineteenth-century liberal assumption of a *natural* harmony of interests: the assumption of a hidden hand which, if allowed to operate freely, would not only ensure the greatest possible freedom, welfare and peace for the strongest and fittest, but would also conjure up the greatest possible freedom, welfare and peace for humanity as a whole. Carr's critique of this doctrine—or more particularly the attempt to apply it in the very changed conditions of the twentieth-century world—was withering.³⁵ But he did not rule out the possibility of *consciously creating* such a harmony; of 'creating a new harmony by artificial means'. Indeed, the achievement of such a harmony, however temporary in broad historical time, is not only the thrust of his final chapter on the prospects for a new international order; it also receives explicit endorsement in the main body of the text.³⁶ In his belief in the possibility of creating some kind of technocratic, collectivist, and functionalist New Jerusalem—and not only on English soil—Carr was just as 'utopian', according to more recent definitions, as the 'utopians' themselves.

Conclusion: The dangers of misinterpretation

In conclusion I would like to briefly address two questions and make one clarification. The first question is: if inter-war 'idealism' never existed as a school of thought properly so-called—if it is merely a rhetorical device invented by Carr to discredit a wide range of things he happened to disagree with—then what did exist? The answer is: a wide variety of things: certainly a greater variety of ideas, opinions, and theories than is conventionally appreciated. Writings in the inter-war period ranged from the class-based analyses of the states-system of Brailsford, Palme-Dutt, and Laski, to the power-political analyses of Spykman and Schuman; from the Christian pessimism of Niebuhr and Voigt, to the humanistic pacifism of Russell and Huxley; from the 'peace through law' approach of Noel-Baker and Lauterpacht, to the 'peace through prosperity' approach of Keynes and Hobson. It is true that the great majority of writers on international issues during the inter-war period worked

³⁵ Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, pp. 102–7.

³⁶ Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, pp. 65–7, 103, 287–307.

within the tradition of what might be broadly called liberal internationalism, but even here it is important to separate three quite distinct strands of liberal thought: Hobbesianism (advocating a strong international authority to lay down the law); Cobdenism (advocating non-interventionism and *laissez faire*); and New Liberal Internationalism (advocating the construction of a wide range of functional, welfare-orientated, bodies operating between and across states).³⁷ To the extent that Carr's critique of 'utopianism' was essentially a critique of liberalism, it was a critique of the first two strands, but emphatically not the third.

The second question is: in what ways has the implicit association of progressivism with utopianism inhibited disciplinary development? The answer is that a number of potentially important lines of enquiry were effectively abandoned in the wake of Carr's critique: more specifically, Carr gave ammunition to those, predominantly of a more conservative cast of mind, who wanted to discredit and nullify the entire liberal internationalist agenda (even though there were certain, 'New Liberal', aspects of that agenda that Carr himself supported). Examples of such lines include: the study, normative and empirical, of peaceful change (begun so promisingly by Carr, Manning, and Dunn);³⁸ research into the economic bases of peace (begun equally promisingly by Hobson, Keynes, and Robbins but largely neglected since);³⁹ analysis of the development, function, and efficacy of the network of rules, regulations, and agreements which Leonard Woolf, as long ago as 1916, gave the name international government (and which has only recently been recommenced under the names 'governance' and 'regimes');⁴⁰ analysis of the effects of what Angell called 'modern economic civilisation' on the authority of states and the traditional means and goals of foreign policy (largely stifled during the Cold War but recently revived in studies of 'globalisation');⁴¹ and the study of the role of public opinion in world politics, and its impact, in particular, on the development of an international social conscience (on which Carr and Zimmern made notable contributions).⁴²

The clarification I would like to make is that it has not been my intention to suggest that the 'realists' were wrong and the 'idealists' were right. Many of the

³⁷ See David Long, 'J. A. Hobson and Idealism in International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 17, 3 (1991), pp. 285–304.

³⁸ See Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, Part IV; C. A. W. Manning (ed.), *Peaceful Change: An International Problem* (New York: Garland, 1972 [1937]); Frederick Sherwood Dunn, *Peaceful Change: A Study of International Procedures* (New York: Harper, 1937); Maurice Bourquin (ed.), *Peaceful Change* (Paris: International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation, 1937).

³⁹ See David Long, *Towards a New Liberal Internationalism: The International Theory of J. A. Hobson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); D. J. Markwell, 'J. M. Keynes and the Economic Bases of Peace', in Long and Wilson, *Thinkers*, pp. 189–213; Lionel Robbins, *The Economic Causes of War* (London: Cape, 1939).

⁴⁰ See Paul S. Reinsch, *Public International Unions* (Boston: Ginn, 1911); Leonard Woolf, *International Government* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1916); Pitman B. Potter, *An Introduction to the Study of International Organization* (New York: Appelton-Century, 1922); David Mitrany, *The Progress of International Government* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1933); Peter Wilson, 'Leonard Woolf and International Government', in Long and Wilson, *Thinkers*, pp. 122–60.

⁴¹ See Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power to National Advantage* (London: Heinemann, 1912); J. D. B. Miller, *Norman Angell and the Futility of War* (London: Macmillan, 1986); Cornelia Navari, 'The Great Illusion Revisited: The International Theory of Norman Angell', *Review of International Studies*, 15 (1989), pp. 341–58; David Mitrany, *A Working Peace System* (London: Oxford University Press, 1943); Lionel Robbins, *Economic Planning and International Order* (London: Cape, 1937).

⁴² E. H. Carr, 'Public Opinion as a Safeguard of Peace', *International Affairs*, 15 (1936), pp. 846–862; Alfred Zimmern, *Public Opinion and International Affairs* (Manchester: CWS, 1931).

criticisms levelled by Carr, and others since, at the liberal internationalist thinkers of the inter-war period were valid, particularly with regard to their lack of rigour. Nor has it been my intention to suggest that the 'realists' were involved in some kind of conspiracy against the 'idealists'. On the contrary, the 'realists' have, on balance, displayed greater sensitivity and intellectual integrity, even sympathy, in dealing with ideas they have disagreed with than the 'idealists' (though both have indulged in more than the occasional misrepresentation). Rather, my object has been to show that certain regrettable consequences have flowed from characterising the thought and debates of the time in this bifurcated and prejudicial way. To paraphrase Stebbing, an idealist, someone with ideals, need not be impractical and foolish, nor a realist someone without ideals, or with ideals but without moral compunction. Yet this presumption has held sway in so much modern IR.