

*This is a passage from a secondary course. It picks up on E. H. Carr's take on the place of positivism in history and history writing and takes up a number of strands of thinking. Most particularly it raises questions about the traps historians might fall into when seeking to simply and summarize in the face of the impossible positivistic task of taking in and accounting for the whole of human experience and every facet of the past while seeking to establish plausible causal links.*

It was evident to Carr that the modern discipline of history had been founded, in the eighteenth century, on a search for causes. . . . [H]istorians and philosophers of history had spent the following 200 years 'busily engaged in an attempt to organize the past experience of mankind by discovering the causes of historical events and the laws which governed them'. Explanations differed – variously mechanical, biological, metaphysical, economic or psychological – but they all rested on the assumption that history 'consisted of marshalling the events of the past in an orderly sequence of cause and effect'. The challenge for historians was to discover and order the inevitable 'multiplicity of causes'. Thus, the causes of the Bolshevik revolution might include Russia's military defeats in the First World War, the collapse of the Russian economy, the failure to reform its agricultural sector, the concentration of workers in Petrograd and Moscow, Bolshevik propaganda and Lenin's decision-making, but which cause – or category of causes – could be regarded as the most significant? Although Bertrand Russell was correct to claim that 'every advance in a science takes us further away from the crude uniformities which are first observed into a greater differentiation of antecedent and consequent, and into a continually wider circle of antecedents recognized as relevant', the historian was simultaneously compelled, maintained Carr, 'to simplify the multiplicity of his answers, to subordinate one answer to another, and to introduce some order and unity into the chaos of happenings and the chaos of specific causes'. The main question was how such simplification could take place. Here, the British historian was less specific, beyond an assumption that generalization implies an 'end' – or a question or purpose towards which human reasoning is directed – and that it entails comparison, with 'rational' causes 'potentially applicable to other countries, other periods, and other conditions'. Since the historian could not embrace 'the whole of experience' but only 'a minute fraction of the facts even of his chosen sector or aspect of history', he was bound to aim for 'a working model', which allowed him to understand the world and to master it, rather than 'a photographic copy of the real world', which was unattainable. Questions, theories and context were necessarily linked within any act of generalization about causation. 'The causes

determine his [the historian's] interpretation of the historical process, and his interpretation determines his selection and marshalling of causes', Carr asserted.

Mark Hewitson (2014) *History and Causality*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, pp. 87–88.