

# CAUSATION IN HISTORY: VARIOUS PERSPECTIVES

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The term 'cause' finds its origin from the Latin word 'causa' which means a relation or connection between the two events. Thus 'cause' is linked with connection with something. A 'cause' can be both simple as well as complex. When it is simple it is not difficult to find but when it is complex it needs investigation and patience to find that out.

E.H. Carr says, 'A study of history is a study of causes'. It implies that as history has distinct discipline of its own, historical causation has its own systematic theory of identifying causes. Historical causation is not interchangeable term with historical narrative. But at the same time it cannot be denied that historical narrative contains a chain of events inter-linked with each other by cause and effect relationship. Hence, historical causation is embedded in historical narrative. It is also a part of historical explanation.

The problem of identification of causes is a difficult one, because the historian cannot objectively and with mathematical precision know the exact causes of any event. They are always somewhat tentative. Historians like Charles Beard and G.J. Renier believe that 'cause' is an ambiguous term, which may refer to anything like motives, influences, forces and other factors. So the term 'cause' has been loosely used in history. Atkinson observes that there is no sharp distinction between casual and non-casual language.

W.H. Walsh in his *An Introduction to Philosophy of History*, gives some practical difficulties in application of historical causation.

- There are historians who are not clear about the nature of historical causes and generally tend to confuse them with conditions, because causes and conditions are interrelated. For example, what caused the downfall of the Moghul Empire is obviously connected with the 18<sup>th</sup> conditions. So causes cannot operate independently of conditions.
- There is a set of historians who believe in the multiplicity of historical causes. For them all the events preceding a particular event are its causes because in their opinion variety of factors jointly operate to produce an effect. Arthur Marwick argues it is not possible to give mono-cause explanation in history, we should give importance to all causes. Marwick divides causes into two categories as broad and specific.
- In history the term 'cause' cannot be understood in the manner we do in science. In science the cause is independently of the observer. But in history cause is interpreted by a deliberate conscious and responsible act of the agent, i.e., historian. Fredrick J. Teggart in his *Theory and Practice of History* argues that motives constitute the ultimate stuff of history, because motives emerge from human desires and aspirations.

- Michael Oakeshott in his *Experience and Modes* believes that the term 'cause' has no meaning in history because historical causes are always perceived in reference to something entirely external to it and such causes are nothing but explanation of the conditions. He further observes that an attempt to seek causes is equal to the breaking up of integrated reality. So he talks about 'explanations'. 'Interpretations', 'the inner logic of events', and 'the inner logic of given situations' but not of causes. This is known as functional approach, as it describes, 'how it came to happen' and not 'why it happened'.
- With the emergence of social Darwinism in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a new theory of causation has become popular with the social scientists. It compares social evolution favourably with the evolution of biological organism. This theory recognises that the causes of change are inherent in the given social reality and external factors only either accelerate or retard the pace of change. The causes according to social Darwinism follow a set pattern not in the form of types of species. As in the biological evolution social changes follow the developmental pattern from simple to complex social organism. Historical reality unfolds itself from the core to the periphery. According to the theory of social Darwinism causes mechanically operate towards a definite goal.
- In recent years the theory of structural relationship of causes has become very popular among sociologists. Following Marc Bloch and Max Webber, some historians design a structure based on holistic social relations, within which social action takes place. The cause of action lies in the ideas represented as collective entities. But the aim of an historian is to develop coherent argument by proceeding from concrete individual action to the ideal type by grasping the meaning of those actions in terms of pattern according to Kenneth E. Bock.
- R.G. Collingwood the 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher of history presents the idealist view of historical causation. While explaining the origin of the word 'cause' he suggests, that is derived from the word, 'causa which originally meant 'guilt', 'lame' or 'accusation', it was often used to explain the cause of the war. He suggests that the causes in the form of conscious and responsible acts of persons should be considered as the proper basis of writing history. He relates 'cause' to the intention of the agent or historian. Collingwood views 'cause' as a resolve or motive of the agent or historian. Historical causes are relative to human conduct. He excludes many causes from his *Idea of History*, such as accidents, natural calamities etc., these events do not originate in the conscious minds of the agents of actions. Causes are conceived as forces which 'impel', 'make', 'induce' and 'compel' agents or historians to act. Historical causes in this sense are relative to human conduct.
- It is described as relativity of causes. In simple words, it means that the cause of a given thing is one of its conditions which are able to produce or prevent it. Such a conception of 'cause' makes 'cause' to remain bound up with human volition, his consciousness of acting. 'cause' therefore is conceived as an activity which operates to produce an effect. So Collingwood points that the historical cause is the specific stand point of the explainer, which differs from person to person. For example, for a car accident, the road builder would find its cause in the defects of road building, a mechanic in the car design, the other in the lack of training of the driver.

The above discussion yields three categories of causes;

1. Cause as conscious and responsible act of a person or motivation.
2. Cause as necessary condition type, i.e., situational type.

3. Cause as factor determining the efficacy of causes in relation to their effects which in turn become causes of subsequent facts or progress and revolution.

The modern historians view the subject of historical question from two complementary angles, i.e., individual category and collective category. Individual category includes personal views, opinions, ambitions, sufferings, etc., which have bearing on historical reality that is causation. The collective category embraces institutions like nations, states, continents, churches, business, organizations, political parties and all such institutions which have a character, life and intention of their own.

In the context of situational type of cause, the historical situation transforms into a social project wherein a number of individuals aggregate and make plans to generate pressure in bringing about a change. This category includes the study of movements in which individual opinion or action coalesces in and contributes to the movement. Individual opinion of action in such cases either illuminates the event or supplements the movements or conforms to the action of the collectively. In any historical investigation, the social, economic and political situations assume more prominence than in the case of individuals whose acts have a limited background. It should always be kept in mind that the effect of a cause of the individual type largely depends on the social status and authority enjoyed by the individual in a particular situation. At the same time, the investigator should also be aware of the fact that individual action in an historical project may not be determined by the individual himself, though it has his consent. So one can accept that modern historians view, the individual and collective entities in relation to and in context with historical situations, depending on the requirements of the subject matter.

As regards chances or the accidental causes, Marx offers three explanations. One, they are historically not important as they either accelerate or retard the pace of change' two, one chance is compensated by another in such a way that both stand cancelled and as such have no bearing on the situation; and, three, chances take place primarily in the realm of individuals.

But E.H. Carr does not accept Marx's interpretation of chance factors. Basing his argument that historians have to take into account and evaluate all available facts and fix their place in terms of their effects on given historical reality, Carr believes that Marx is as much arbitrary in under assessing the importance of 'chances' or accidental causes as the conservative historians exaggerate their importance. Historians attempt at brushing aside some events as chance factors or causes makes Carr suspect them of 'intellectual laziness' or 'low intellectual vitality'. He believes that all causes are meaningful in history and they can be rationally explained and fitted into the broader pattern of events.

Carr says that historian's concern with causes has dual and reciprocal character. On the one hand, the causes determine his interpretation of the historical process; on the other hand, his interpretation determines his selection and marshalling of the causes. On the basis of the relative significance of cause or set of causes to another, historian puts causes in hierarchy. This ordering of causes provides rational explanation and interpretation to draw valid conclusions. Therefore, historian does not search for causes, but he selects cause or a set of causes in terms of historical significance.

Carr says that a 'cause' gets importance due to its subject matter. There are always a large number of cause and effect sequences. The primary task of an historian is to reject all those cause and effect sequences which are not historically significant. There is no definite measure to determine the slandered of historical significance of a given cause and effect sequence. It depends on historical competence to explain these causes in rational terms. The causes which do not fit in the rational pattern of cause and

effect sequence are accidental or irrational according to Carr. Whether or not all those causes which are used by the historian are accidental causes. Carr suggests that it depends on the subject matter, because a certain cause may or may not be necessary for developing cause-and-effect sequence for making a rational interpretation of historical reality. Carr illustrates his point by referring to the event of Cleopatra's nose. He says that it makes no sense as a general proposition to suggest that Generals lose battles because they are infatuated with beautiful queens. Believing that all those explanations which serve some end are rational explanations, Carr rejects 'Cleopatra's nose' for it serves no end in terms of general proposition. It is, therefore, an irrational cause as far as victory or defeat of a General in the battle is concerned. So we may deduce that accidental causes, being unique themselves, cannot be generalized. Carr's key to treatment of causation involves interpretation, value judgement and explanation.

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