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What If? The Historian and the Counterfactual

FRANCIS J. GAVIN

This essay lays out why many scholars, particularly historians, are inherently skeptical of counterfactuals. It highlights several of the most obvious errors that are often made by those undertaking counterfactual reasoning. It also highlights how these articles go a long way toward developing effective rules for the appropriate and most effective use of counterfactuals.

Like many historians, I have mixed feelings about counterfactuals. On the one hand, a good historian seeks to discover and explain what happened in the past. The use of counterfactuals may seem to imply that this task is relatively straightforward and simple, when in fact evidence is often scarce and typically pulls in different directions. Historical work can be difficult and painstaking. Rarely does a full, universally embraced version of important past events emerge; in any important history, scores of variables may be in dispute. Historians well understand what many social scientists often forget: getting the facts straight is essential and often close to impossible. No matter how plausible, “what-ifs” are not part of our mission. This has led some historians to take a rather dim view of counterfactual exercises, believing they do violence to the craft of historical reconstruction. While I have some sympathy for this view, it is also very clear that the human brain is hardwired for counterfactual reasoning. It is close to impossible to develop theories or frameworks for understanding a complex world without imagining alternative causal paths, shifting variables, and different outcomes. We employ counterfactuals continually as a way of assessing our decisions and weighing our choices. Surely, even the most devoted historian must acknowledge that

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there is some merit to using this tool to better understand how the world works? Is there a way to balance the understandable skepticism toward counterfactuals while exploiting the obvious benefits that come from their well thought-out, well-structured use? Can we go so far as to establish rules and criteria for their effective use, to make counterfactual analysis a method on par with other social science tools?

During my first year in my PhD program, my advisor, the diplomatic historian Marc Trachtenberg, used two counterfactuals in his World Politics class that opened my eyes to their analytical power. The first involved the origins of the Second World War. My assumptions at the time mirrored the conventional wisdom—that the global economic collapse created a path for the rise of Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany, whose aggressive intentions were hardwired. Studying the statecraft of German foreign minister and Nobel Peace prize winner Gustav Stresemann, I shared the sense many did that the collapse of Weimar was a tragic missed opportunity for Germany and Europe. Trachtenberg revealed, however, that when Stresemann's papers were fully opened, they exposed the Weimar leader's clear desire to eventually see all German-speaking territories reincorporated into Germany. Given that these territories were in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and elsewhere, it is hard to see how this could have been achieved without a war. In other words, even Germany's most peaceful, beloved interwar statesman possessed a view of German interests that would have made conflict likely. This highlighted the problematic nature of perhaps our most powerful, widely accepted counterfactual—that if Hitler had not risen to power, war in Europe could have been avoided. While perhaps the genocidal barbarity of Hitler would not have occurred, the Stresemann story revealed that there were also deep and powerful structural factors at work that may have induced war regardless of who was in power.

The second counterfactual Trachtenberg used was of a much different nature. When discussing the Vietnam War, he asked us to imagine a scenario where the United States "won" the conflict. At first blush we all assumed this would have been good for US national security interests—the goal of the war, after all, was to defeat the Viet Cong insurgency, prevent North Vietnam from taking the South, and build a strong, independent South Vietnam. In all likelihood, however, a "victory" would have been anything but a good outcome: the United States would have found itself pouring blood and treasure into Southeast Asia for years if not decades to prop up a weak South Vietnamese state. More importantly, the continued US military presence would have forced the Russians and Chinese to continue to work together in a more or less unified fashion. An American loss and departure from Southeast Asia revealed that the two communist countries had very different, competing interests, both in Vietnam and elsewhere, and the US defeat allowed space for the Sino-Soviet split to fully emerge. As is well known, the United States exploited this rupture to open relations with

China and pursue a more nuanced (and arguably effective) policy toward the Russians. Triangular diplomacy and a de facto partnership, if not quite alliance with China, helped improve US geopolitical circumstances vis-à-vis the Soviet Union enormously.

How should we think about these kinds of counterfactual exercises? As the examples above demonstrate, they are certainly powerful and suggestive, and clearly of great value in making us challenge our theories and beliefs about causality. But they are also very different: the first involves the core work that historians do of unearthing new evidence, while the second is a highly speculative exercise. How can we know when these kinds of exercises are valid? How can we distinguish among different types of counterfactual reasoning, decide when are they an appropriate tool of analysis, and determine how can they be used and not abused?

The three excellent articles in the present symposium get us quite far in answering these questions. The thrust in each is to get us to think about counterfactuals from a methodological perspective and to come up with rules and guidelines for when and how they can be employed most effectively. While this is a laudable effort, again the inner historian is not without skepticism. This is one area where historians and political scientists could not be more different. To an outsider, political scientists seem obsessed with questions of method, often to the point of distraction, whereas historians are no doubt guilty of ignoring these important questions completely. “I know it when I see it,” the instinct of the historian, has little salience outside the guild. But treating counterfactuals as if they were similar to a statistical tool also seems far-fetched. The right approach, I suspect, lies somewhere in between.

Frank Harvey recognizes these dilemmas in his insightful analysis. He makes the important point that all counterfactuals are not created equal. Many—most?—of the counterfactuals we encounter are “weak”: simplistic, mono-causal conjectures that mask deep biases about causality and agency. Should we therefore eliminate counterfactual analysis, as many historians would suggest? No, Harvey says; we simply must do them better. He develops a set of standards—namely what he calls comparative counterfactual analysis (CCA)—to make them stronger.

Demanding “comparative plausibility” and combining CCA with the best practices of process tracing are among the steps necessary to disqualify weak counterfactuals. This is a compelling argument, even if elements of the example he gives—an Al Gore presidency pursuing policies similar to those of the George W. Bush administration toward Iraq—are not always completely convincing, at least to this reader.

Jack S. Levy and Richard Ned Lebow also provide useful instruction on the use and misuse of counterfactuals. Levy offers a rich, sophisticated, and much needed treatment of the epistemology behind counterfactual reasoning. Levy’s essay is the ideal introduction for anyone wrestling with the

promise and pitfalls of this tool, acknowledging criticisms of the practice and emphasizing the difference between the “methodological, epistemological, or evaluative use of counterfactuals and the descriptive analysis of counterfactuals.” Levy also distinguishes between plausible and miracle counterfactuals, and their roles in identifying causality. He urges us to embrace the “minimal rewrite” of history rule when choosing counterfactuals.¹

Lebow accepts Levy’s definition but goes further, arguing “counterfactuals heighten our sensitivity to contingency and the determining effects of nonsystematic factors in most political outcomes. . . . They are an essential tool in formulating theories and propositions because they offer otherwise unavailable vantage points.”² Both essays highlight the very important point that the value and use of counterfactuals depend upon what type of social science methodology they are supporting. Quantitative scholars often analyze many pieces of data, all of which look alike. Changing or altering that kind of data—increasing or decreasing the N, so to speak—will look quite different from altering data in qualitative work, where often each piece of data is unique.

All three of these papers help us understand how better to use counterfactual reasoning, and if nothing else, alert us to when they are used poorly or inappropriately. They go a long distance toward relieving at least some of the concerns a historian may have. There are five issues, however, that I would flag for further discussion and debate when thinking about counterfactual analysis.

First, anyone employing counterfactuals must avoid what I call the fallacy of focusing on the last out. Imagine a baseball game where the outcome is decided by a hit with two outs in the bottom of the ninth, or a football team that loses due to a missed field goal. It is easy to imagine a counterfactual that changes the last, most visible variable—the batter striking out instead of getting a hit, or the wind shifting to move the football between the goal posts instead of outside—and delivering a different outcome. But how much does that tell us about the causal story we are interested in? Focusing on the last out or the missed field goal can blind us to the critical events that occurred during the first eight innings of the baseball game or the first three and a half quarters of a football game. Any one or a series of earlier plays could have just as easily changed the outcome of the contest, but we understandably (and sometimes correctly) focus on the last plays. We all know this, of course, and in some cases focusing on ninth-inning counterfactuals (the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, for example) may be appropriate. But this trap bears watching.

¹ Jack S. Levy, “Counterfactuals, Causal Inference, and Historical Analysis,” *Security Studies* 24, no. 3 (July–September 2015): 378–402 (“methodological”), 378–402 (“minimal rewrite”).

² Richard Ned Lebow, “Counterfactuals And Security Studies,” *Security Studies* 24, no. 3 (July–September 2015): 403–412.

Second, the causal focus in most counterfactuals concentrates on linear sequences of events and what I call vertical causality, or how events unfold over time. But important political events have what I call a horizontal causality—events and decisions are linked over space as well as time. Consider the origins of the US military escalation in South Vietnam. Looked at in isolation, we get one view of the policy deliberations among American national security officials. But simultaneous discussions were taking place among the same decision makers about US nuclear proliferation policy, which had a strong (and previously unrecognized) influence on decisions about Southeast Asia. Changing one variable—a particular leader, for example—may be less consequential when the horizontal causal axis is included in our analysis. Similarly, one cannot understand US support for the French in Southeast Asia in the early 1950s without wrestling with the explosive politics surrounding re-arming the Federal Republic of Germany. Policy makers well understand that causal chains move from side to side, so to speak, as well as up and down. Any use of counterfactual analysis must be aware of these interconnections and linkages.

Third, we must be careful that counterfactual reasoning not bias us to focus too much on simple or exogenous factors, such as accidental events, where it is quite easy to imagine alternative scenarios and outcomes. Counterfactuals may be less helpful in isolating complex or deep structural variables, even when they are driving the event or issue that interests us. Counterfactual analysis may also underplay situations of equifinality, where there are multiple paths to the same outcome. Figuring out which variables are crucial in those circumstances may be difficult.

Fourth, and relatedly, counterfactual analysis must guard against individual/leader bias. In some sense, focusing on individuals in counterfactuals is understandable, given the daunting odds present in reproduction that led to our own personal creation! For whatever reason, counterfactuals that emphasize questions of who was and who was not in charge are often the most popular: consider how often we hear, “what if Hitler had not taken power,” “what if President John F. Kennedy had not been assassinated,” “what if Gore and not Bush became the president of the United States in 2000?” Focusing on individuals, however, exposes assumptions about causality and agency that may or may not be accurate.

Fifth, concerns over equifinality, complexity, and deep structure reveal why certain scholarly traditions will inevitably look at counterfactual analysis with skepticism. As already discussed, the historian will point out that this tool rarely captures the intricacy, interactive effects, and unintended consequences apparent in trying to understand and explain the past. But structural theorists—think Kenneth Waltz—may also see counterfactuals as a violation of their goal of parsimony. Can the concerns of both groups be accommodated?

In the end, what are we left with? These essays convincingly remove many of the arguments a historian might make about dismissing counterfactual analysis entirely. Without counterfactuals, the best we can do is to describe events; assessing or analyzing them is close to impossible. But these papers also expose the limitations of counterfactual analysis and the difficulties in formalizing rules and regulations for their use.

Perhaps the best way to think of how and when we might use counterfactuals is along a spectrum. On the most favorable end, counterfactual analysis can be a very powerful tool to assess competing policies and identify key trends in international politics. Think here of the scenario planning process first developed by Shell Oil and improved upon by organizations like the National Intelligence Council and the Global Business Network. These exercises of imagining alternative futures rely heavily on counterfactual reasoning, albeit in the future; it is almost history in reverse, where different variables are swapped out to identify what forces are truly driving things. But scenario planning also explicitly eschews point predictions. This highlights the limitations of counterfactual analysis on the other end of the spectrum—as a social science methodology. It is what might be called a “ghost” methodology, since you cannot truly observe, test, measure, or replicate a counterfactual. It is also difficult to “scale up” this kind of analysis. Is it really possible to establish rules and practices, in the same way we might for a quantitative method, when counterfactuals cannot be tested or replicated? Counterfactuals cannot be used to predict, the *sine qua non* of rigorous scientific tools. As the papers reveal, more rigorous standards for how and when we use counterfactual analysis can be most helpful, especially to disconfirm (as opposed to confirm) hypotheses. But they are blunt instruments, and I fear any effort to turn them into a “methodological tool” on par with, say, statistics, will remain elusive.

This does not mean that counterfactual analysis is not without value for social scientists. As the examples I learned in Marc Trachtenberg’s class reveal, they are powerful tools to expose our biases and prejudices, challenge our assumptions, evaluate our theories, and reveal both weaknesses and strengths in how we frame our research questions and puzzles. In that sense, they may be better than other “methodologies,” as they inherently recognize how limited our tools are (and likely are to remain) to reconstruct, explain, and generalize about complex political phenomena. That may not be the answer social scientists are looking for, but it is one that both historians and policy makers, who see their task more as a “craft” than a science, have long understood.

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