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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Winnerling, T. (2009). Invention Formosa, the empire of the Great Khan and Lilliput: can 18th century fiction be counterfactual? *Historical Social Research*, 34(2), 215-234. <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.34.2009.2.215-234>

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Invented Formosa, the Empire of the Great Khan and Lilliput: Can 18th Century Fiction be Counterfactual?

*Tobias Winnerling**

Abstract: »*Ein erfundenes Formosa, das Reich des Großkhans und Lilliput: Können die Fiktionen des 18. Jahrhunderts kontrafaktisch sein?*«. This paper proposes a new use for old descriptions of the foreign that from today's point of view cannot be considered sources of factual information. Instead of questioning how much of these reports is empirically verifiable, they are usable as counterparts to empirical scenarios in historical comparisons, provided they can be qualified as counterfactual. There are two criteria they have to meet to make this possible: They may not be too far away from the empirical reality, and they must be structurally compatible to modern scientific methodology, therefore descriptive and empirically orientated. This means that fictionality and counterfactuality are not mutually exclusive or incompatible, and old accounts can be used as counterfactuals. The material for demonstration is provided by analysing the descriptions Marco Polo and Mandeville gave of the Mongolian Empire, George Psalmanazar's Formosa, and Swift's Lilliput.

Keywords: Counterfactuality, Fictiveness, Methodology, Marco Polo, Mandeville, Swift, Psalmanazar.

Introduction

This article proposes a new way of interpreting existing fictional or semi-fictional historical accounts; treated as counterfactuals, they can serve as basis for historical comparison. As such comparisons normally involve two (or more) empirically grounded scenarios which are compared to each other, the fictional nature of the accounts I examine imposes some alterations and restrictions on the process of historical comparison.

First, there is need for terminological clarification. 'Factual', 'counterfactual' and 'fictional' are terms that I will use more or less different to common usage. The crucial point here is the definition of factuality, as both 'counterfactual' and 'fictional' are terms derived from the idea of the factual. As the question what exactly is fact and what not leads to a philosophical discussion of the nature of truth – what defines 'reality' as basis for 'factual'? – on which I cannot embark here, I will use the term somewhat flexibly. I refer to 'fact' as something necessarily substantiated empirically and intersubjectively in a sub-

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ject-independent outer world; this leaves room to manoeuvre regarding what is fictional and what is not. The relation between ‘counterfactual’ and ‘fictional’ is that of two sets of propositions, with ‘counterfactual’ as a subset of ‘fictional’: every counterfactual scenario is fictional, but not every fictional scenario should be considered counterfactual. Now both of these sets derive their characteristics from the definition of factuality: fictional can be termed as everything that is non-factual, and counterfactual as everything that is opposite to fact. The difference is important; something has not only to be not factual to be counterfactual, but to be very close to fact, something that could be fact if certain conditions were true. These conditions are set by the counterfactual scenario, and are restricted, too: first, they may not be too far-fetched; second and most important as I will argue, they must implicate the same pattern of scientific procedure as accounts we consider as factual do. This means we cannot separate ‘counterfactual’ and ‘fictional’ as clearly as we could intuitively want to; if a scenario that seems at first clearly fictional measures up to the standards set above, it may nevertheless be used as a counterfactual scenario. This complex of questions can be formulated shortly as pondering if we can ask: ‘*What if account X was right?*’ in a meaningful way.

Now, how can historians benefit from this definition of counterfactuality? If some mediaeval and early modern travelogues can be considered counterfactual, there is a main benefit: The accounts identified here as counterfactual can in a second step be used as counterparts in the comparisons proposed above. If I want to get a closer understanding of processes at work in the Empire of the Great Khan, I can compare what I know about it to what I know about another similar Empire. Standard historical procedure, with well-known restrictions: Different historical entities are never totally comparable, so my results will vary according to the chosen counterpart. Plus, I have to acquire sufficient knowledge about the counterpart to understand it before comparing. Or I can compare my knowledge about the Mongolian Empire with the knowledge Marco Polo had. This is standard procedure as well, but within another framework of questioning, asking empirical questions, whether he reported well and how he can contribute to our knowledge pool. And it has often been done already. I propose to shift the question framework in the second procedure to a praxeological one: If I assume for the sake of argument that Marco Polo tells the truth, under the above restrictions for counterfactuality, I compare two Empires of the Great Khan and ask for each: Why does it work? What processes administrate, constitute, advance it? This will, as each comparison, help to secure my findings by testing against the counterpart. What I gain is a counterpart offering theoretically total comparability, and needing only additional knowledge about Marco Polo and his work to be understandable. Of course it is not factual, but fictional; we have to subtract the fictional parts from our result,

meaning we use the counterfactual as an operator to transform our knowledge of the examined¹. We do not end up enlarging our knowledge base, but with a deeper understanding of it. Regrettably, I cannot provide an example of such a comparison here, as I only aim to sketch the conditions of the possibility to do it.

Can conventional counterfactual scenarios be employed as tools of research analogously? They help determining the importance of events by comparing their outcomes with those set up as a counterfactual scenario; they too compare a factual against a fictional counterpart, only they use again another framework of questioning asking for quality or state of an event, not for its inherent processes. They use what can be called ‘what if...?’-questions – or ‘new counterfactuals’, while I suggest what could be called ‘could-have-been’-scenarios, or ‘old counterfactuals’. They are constituted directly from the sources, historical accounts that can no longer claim factuality, because we judge them now on the basis of empirical knowledge and scientific methodology as fictional or at least semi-fictional.

Historical travelogues and ‘descriptions’ of faraway countries are particularly well suited to such uses. The numerous descriptions of Africa, America and Asia that Europeans produced were read and dispersed not only because they pleased Europe’s curiosity, but – because of their characteristic quality as made by Europeans for Europeans – they also served the purpose of self-adulation in the other. This was done for self-assurance, and possibly because the reports from far away brought the things seen into a shape predefined by expectations formed through traditional fixed conceptions of the foreign, or invented those regions conforming these expectations. Especially Asia, were the cases I study here all at least approximately where located, was well provided with such patterns of interpretation and expectation by European tradition. So it could happen that the version ‘better’ from a modern-empirical viewpoint was second in reception to a version less well grounded empirically but serving contemporary expectations. The 18th century provides a particularly good starting point for discussing counterfactuals, as it thought science and imagination, fact and fiction, not strictly separated as we do today, but relied on the mutual enhancement of both as a means to extend the possibilities of research (Smith 1990, 109/111).

My materials are somewhat dispersedly arranged: I examine Marco Polo’s ‘*Divisament dou monde*’, Jehan de Mandeville’s ‘*Travels*’, George Psalmanazar’s ‘*Historical and Geographical Description of Formosa*’ and Jonathan Swift’s ‘*Gulliver’s Travels*’, including Marco Polo and Mandeville under the heading of 18th-century fact and fiction. They produced the two most fa-

¹ This process is analogous to a logical operation, where additional operators can be introduced to transform the initial term, provided they are subtracted again from the term before presenting a final outcome.

mous, most widely spread and most read descriptions of Asia of the Middle Ages. As they did so, they also produced two examples that illustrate two ways in which knowledge of abroad could be organized when they were written; two patterns that continued to be in function at least until the 18th century. The four-century-gap between Mandeville's *Travels* and Psalmanazars *Description* is bridged by the 18th century's assumption that it was negligible, that what the earlier authors related was still part of its collected knowledge and had to be accounted among scientifically reliable data.

To test if these accounts can be used as counterfactuals, I have to show that they fulfil the criteria set above. What they report must constitute a body of information not too far-fetched, a possible could-have-been; this can be tested by comparison with empirical knowledge. And they must be structured after a pattern of scientific methodology like our own; this can be tested by investigating their manner of verificating what they report.

To examine further if being fiction discredits an account as a possible counterfactual, the selected works show different degrees of fictionality. If it does, the more fictional an account, the less suited it is for use as a counterfactual. In ascending order of fictionality I put Marco Polo first, as basically empirical with fictional parts; next, Mandeville, basically fictional with empiric parts; then, Psalmanazar, fictional but intended to be read as true, and, last, Swift, intently fictional but thought to directly affect the reader, thus reality.

As I tried to pick prominent or striking examples and to be concise while covering a wide time-span, I left out many works that could be included here; yet I think what lies in between fits into the general pattern provided by my starting and end points.

Polo

Marco Polo wrote his *Divisament dou monde*, *The Wonders of the World*, in Genuese captivity assisted by a Pisan scribe called Rustichello, near the end of the 13th century (Guignard 2003, 395–8). Therefore the question to the real authorship of the book is open (Münkler 2000, 104–5); but as both authors in the text melt together to a fictional storytelling person named 'Marco Polo', it is this Polo I henceforth address by the name. He claimed to account for what he had done, seen and heard on his travels that took him from the Black Sea shores to the Chinese and Indonesian coasts of the Pacific. He told of things unheard of, that in China there were cities as populous as entire European principalities, that those people used strange black stones to kindle their fires (Polo 2003, 149), and that everyone knew his birthday (Polo 2003, 151). He even asserted to have seen the marvellous unicorn on Java, but that contrary to the European variety it was a rather ugly brute, plump, dumb and coloured greyish-black (Polo 2003, 261). Of course, his travelogue also included rather gloomy

places such as the province of darkness where the sun will never shine (Polo 2003, 364–5).

But the distinguishing feature of his text is that on such occasions he reports from the distance, as something he only has heard of. And his and all ages until the Scientific Revolution ascribed much more credibility to hearsay than we do (Febvre 1988, 204).

Marco Polo instead used a mode of description resting on face validity, therefore bound to the present and basically descriptive in orientation because the described is shown as it appears to be. If he really was in China is contested, and for good reason; but even if not, he reported sound evidence. Some cities counted inhabitants by hundreds of thousands, black coal was used as fuel, and for reasons astrological everyone indeed knew his birthday, at least in the cities. His unicorn was a specimen of the Javanese rhinoceros, nowadays nearly extinct due to the magical powers ascribed to its horn (which differed in function from those ascribed to the unicorn of European legend whose horn had the power to neutralise poison). Even the province of darkness may be explained in innocent terms, as he reports this country to be far north, bordering on Russia (Polo 2003, 365) – polar winter may easily be mistaken for perpetual darkness by the passing visitor.

It is problematic to deal with this account like that, as it is impossible to retrace what the historical Polo and Rustichello thought while writing (Münkler 2000, 108–10); but this is not my aim anyway. I refer to a metastructure underlying the topical framework of the text that I call *mode of description*, as the explicitly counterfactual treatment of the account makes it possible to deal with it its fictional shape. The same holds true for Mandeville, whose real identity is still unknown and whose text is for the most part compiled from dozens of earlier works; in treating author and text as set up for the counterfactual scenario, these difficulties are not negated but move to the background.

Mandeville

The book of an author introducing himself as Sir Jehan² de Mandeville, Knight of St. Albans, appeared in 1356 and was probably written by a Flemish barber named Jehan de Bourgogne, with the cognomen ‘a la barbe’ (Baumgärtner 1993, 188). He produced a description of travels from the Holy Land through the Levant into Asia, starting off in England on St. Michael’s Day of 1322, touching touristic highlights as the Terrestrial Paradise before coming to China and Indonesia. Even though the Knighted protagonist never existed as the person he claimed to be, and though he dedicated much more space to fables and tales of wonder than Marco Polo did, he linked so much better to traditional

2 The first name also appears as Jean or John.

concepts reaching back to greco-roman antiquity of how the East looked, that he overtook Polo in the reception and for centuries was attributed to be the more plausible of both. From today's point of view it seems strange that it were the fictional parts of the book which were used to ascribe credibility to the account. They fitted the wished-for picture of reality better, and thus were easier to accommodate in the existing framework of knowledge.

Mandeville used a mode of description bound to the past, legitimised through recurrence on tradition, that is basically of prescriptive character because it shows the described as it shall be in the eyes of the reader. The Terrestrial Paradise is only one very prominent example of this, as European tradition localised it following the Book of Genesis: '*And the LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed.*' (Gen 2,8). It was surrounded by mighty rivers as said there; that it had to be elevated above common ground was taken for granted, thus nearer to God, further away from sinful earth. All this Mandeville repeated faithfully, and so could only be right. In an age rating proof by *auctoritas* higher than proof by experience, his approach was infallible; but he not only tapped the Holy Writ but also the other source of mediaeval knowledge, graeco-roman antiquity. The same chapter XXXIII of his 'Travels' where he espies Paradise also contains a description of '*the hills of gold that pissemyres keepen*', an area full of gold in possession of fox-sized ants (Seymour 1967, 218–22). This reaches down to Herodotus, who tells us so in Book III of his 'Histories' (Herodotus 1995, 455–6). Mandeville also used already existing travelogues and world histories extensively and intensely, reshaping and connecting them in his treatise (Münkler 2000, 126–7/138–9).

Psalmanazar

The '*Historical and Geographical Description of Formosa, an Island subject to the Emperor of Japan*' of an ingenious author we still only know by his alias George Psalmanazar, was first published in London in 1704 – an instant success (Penzer 1926, xiii). The presentation of the island, its inhabitants, history, religion, culture, that Psalmanazar gave as a pretended native was completely invented, but not until 1706 was the British public convinced that it fell for an impostor. Only in 1764 could the confession that his '*Description*' was a fraud be read from his own writing – in his posthumously published memoirs (Lynch 1999, 3). He committed it only once in his lifetime, anonymously (Keevak 2004, 10).

Though his reception was mixed, he could outrun all charges brought against him by a mixture of clever manoeuvring and chutzpa for a while. It helped that in London there was hardly any empirical basis for uncovering him – no Formosan had been seen yet, so how compare him? He furthermore capitalised on contemporary conceptions of East Asia as the antipode of Europe in

every respect. Formosans as inhabitants of the antipodes had necessarily to be different, wearing strange garments and following even stranger customs and morals, to qualify for the really exotic (Lynch 1999, 5). To credibly postulate a foreign identity the European impostor of the 18th century had primarily to assert that he took up and further fed Europe's traditional prejudices concerning his chosen region of the world in his construction.

Psalmanazar's *'Description'* found a ready market; from 1704 to 1739 there were seven editions, in Latin, English, French, Dutch, and German (Keevak 2004, 9). In the intellectual atmosphere of the early 18th century characterised by strong request for and (re)production of geographical knowledge (Schneider 2005, 1) this Formosa found willing reception – at first.

Swift

A few years later but still in this same atmosphere another book appeared: The *'Travels into several Remote Nations of the World. In Four Parts'* by a certain Lemuel Gulliver, 'first a Surgeon, and then a Captain of several Ships' according to the title page of the first impression published in 1726 (Swift 2005, xliv). This Gulliver soon turned out to be as fictional as the heathen Formosan and the pilgrim Knight, serving as a pseudonym to the well-known pamphleteer and dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, Jonathan Swift. Though the book's intent was utterly satirical, it seems to have served Swift for a higher purpose: Not only to present mankind a mirror in which to see its faults but also a hidden guide how to correct them (Casement 1992, 539). Despite the obvious fictionality of *'Gulliver's Travels'* it therefore is worth to be taken into account when we talk about counterfactual scenarios, because that is exactly the purpose they shall serve: Not only diversion, but deeper understanding of something by viewing it from the perspective of the could-have-been. The satirist, here Swift, has to: *'(...) destabilize meaning by activating contending versions of truth through such means as irony and alternative narratives of the same events.'* (Rabb 2006, 326).

What was given in those *'Travels in some remote Parts of the World'* was not very much like what had been handed down through the centuries, and so could not claim verity by authority. Fitting with this was that each voyage took Gulliver out of the realms of the known, to shores untrod by European feet. There existed no fixed traditional imagery for these regions because they lay on the fringe of the unknown, whereas the Asian mainland Mandeville and Marco Polo described had to be travelled by a path beaten out by generations of traders, merchants, adventurers, missionaries and others.

And there are indications that Gulliver employs an empirical mode of observation: He apologises for telling things unbelievable to those who have not seen them (Swift 2005, 103).

Going beyond the scope of his reader's expectations, he could not have founded his reports on authority even if he wanted to, for authority set the scope. As the only one who saw the marvels he recorded, he was the sole authority he had on this subject, and had to recur on himself for proof. His eyes had seen it, so it existed empirically. The reliance on proof by eyesight, orientated towards the present, based on the things just seen, makes sufficiently clear that Swift in writing as Gulliver used an empirical mode of description. This notion is somewhat obscured today because we know that what he related was fictional to the bone. But if we ask the forbidden question '*What if Gulliver was right?*' pretending not to know about the truthfulness of his tales, we end up with a conclusion like in the Marco Polo case: Under restrictions concerning fables and exaggerations we might use him as a source for further research. In Gulliver's case, admittedly, those restrictions would have to be quite strong. As we do know how much trust to put into his record, we still use it, but as a source on a different field of research – how the 18th century looked upon itself and on its travelogues. But that does not discredit this account as a scientific tool regarding counterfactual readings of processes.

Having looked at the basic modes of world-representation the authors in question used, they can be summed up thus: Mandeville and Psalmanazar used a prescriptive, pastbound mode of description, while Marco Polo and Swift made use of a descriptive, presentbound mode of recording. But this alone is not sufficient to answer the question what determines if they can be used as counterfactual scenarios. A preliminary answer may be that it is connected with these modes of representation; but how exactly? A closer look might show.

The Empire of the Great Khan

After an exhausting journey of three and a half years the three Polos – Marco, his father Nicolao and his uncle Maffeo – arrived at the court of the Great Khan, presently situated in the city of '*Clemeinfu*' (Polo 2003, 19), or '*Ciandu*' (Polo 2003, 105), meaning Shangdu, where the Khan resided during summer since 1263, build under the name of Kaiping Fu since 1256 (Polo 2003, 426). Marco Polo elaborately described the bamboo construction of the take-apart summer palace (Polo 2003, 105-6); and he also gives an account of the various sorcerers employed at court for entertainment. As the year moves on, so does the Great Khan; his winter court, held in his main palace, is located correctly in '*Canbaluc*', Khanbalyk, the City of the Khan (Polo 2003, 120). This palace merits special attention, for, as Polo says, one cannot think of something more magnificent. The great dining hall holds 6000 people, its walls are laid-out with silver and gold; the roof shines in different colours, enamelled in red and green, yellow and blue; and as if this were not enough, there is another palace built aside it exactly the same in size and splendour, as the seat of the Khan's chosen heir (Polo 2003, 120-2). This sounds incredible enough for an European audi-

ence, but there are little details within that suggest a high rate of plausibility even today. In giving the Khan's seating order, he observes that the Emperor dines with his throne oriented to a north-south-line, so that he is facing south. This corresponds with Confucius' precepts for a ruler, as expressed in his 'Analects', when: '*The Master said: Yong may be made to face south.*' (Confucius 2003, 20) to express Yong's ability of leading a state. As this detail was of no special importance to a European audience, that it is reported is an indication of an empirical approach, listing something to which the Chinese themselves ascribed high importance indeed.

But not all his descriptions merit such faith. As to the court mages already mentioned, he charges them with black magic and devil worship, as they command weather by means of sorcery and levitate pots and pans in front of the dining audience (Polo 2003, 107).

He employs descriptions based on observation, and such based on tradition; his contemporaries would accept one kind and reject the other. Taken together, as they were meant when written, they give a picture of the Great Khan and his empire that seems distorted from today's point of view, counterfactual, for we will not assume there were devil-worshipping mages or unicorns. Instead we will carefully pick the points that seem to be likely to be validated – as, for instance, the Great Khan's dinner arrangements – and claim that the remaining parts represent corruptions of perception brought about by superstition and a lack of means to inquire into what came to his ears.

Polo's contemporaries, however, rather viewed magic as possible and a take-apart palace as out of the question. The author did not call on the popular notion about the powers of satanic magic as validation basis for his claim, he only employed it as a correlative point to add credibility to the already stated. This present-bound descriptive mode prevails in his tales, despite the unquestionable distortions the seen had still to undergo in being described. As our scientific thinking today works along the same lines of empirical validation, we can still use the materials he provides. To ask the question '*What if Marco Polo was right?*' seems not odd after all. Why? His views of the lands he visited differ from the images we are used to. But as we acknowledge that what he recorded is mostly composed of data gathered and processed by methods we accept as conforming in principle to scientific methodology, we can compare them to what we know in order to further our own understanding of the processes working in the empire of the Great Khan. That the main paradigm of his writing is empirically based like our own conception of science is the reason for which we are able to regard his account not only as a source, but also as a scientific tool.

Turning to Mandeville, the stage is set for a different appearance of the Great Khan and his empire. At the beginning of his description of the Great Khan, he frankly states that there were contacts before him (Seymour 1967, 154). Though names are not given, every reader would know who was meant.

Unlike his predecessor Marco Polo, Mandeville is short on geographical information, but concerning the location of the emperor's seat he says that '*toward the east*' lies an old city, without mentioning a name, besides which the Mongols had built another city called '*Caydon*' – that would have been Polo's '*Ciandu*'. Both cities are '*in circuit more than xx. myle*', and somewhere in there is the palace of the Great Khan, consisting of at least three different palaces and a walled area of two miles circumference (Seymour 1967, 154-5). In these complexes there is a hall, upheld by 24 pillars of solid gold, and decorated even more sumptuously than before: the walls are covered in panther's skins, which are blazingly red and exquisitely fragrant, therefore valued higher than gold. This connects to antiquity's belief that the panther's scent was a powerful lure for prey, so that it hunted almost effortlessly. He then very neatly repeats the Khan's seating order as given by Marco Polo, except that he delivers it together with an account of the thrones of the emperor, his wives and court ladies, separately emblazoned with gold and jewels. As the Great Khan is, as we have already heard, the wealthiest potentate on earth, there is no end to the list of things made of precious metals and stones. Golden clockwork peacocks dance on the Khan's table, which is made from gold, ivory, amethyst, and aloe, a wood claimed to come from paradise. The entire hall is decorated with grapes, made of crystal, beryl, '*iris*', topaz, ruby, garnet, emerald, chrysolite, onyx, and many more (Seymour 1967, 157). A bit tiresome, but an informative manifestation of mediaeval Europe's fascination with Oriental splendour. Of course, such treasures are well guarded, and to explain how he was admitted to see them, the author relates that he has served the Great Khan in his war against the king of Mancy (Seymour 1967, 158). This must be taken to refer to the last campaign of the Mongols against the Southern Song dynasty during the 1270s, just under 100 years before the book was written.³

Mandeville gives information that can be proved by record – e.g. as to the end of the Southern Song and the establishment of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty by war – or that can be founded only on traditional topoi like the powers of the panther's skin. But unlike the work of Polo, we dissect the Mandevillian opus not to search for descriptions we can identify as empirically true, but for what is truly false. We cannot ask '*What if Mandeville was right?*', for we do not brush aside the corruptions as the lesser part of the tale, it is those corruptions that we turn to. They provide spyholes into the foundations upon which medieval thought rested when it concerned the wider world.

³ To console the reader even in the face of such glory that nothing on earth is perfect, Mandeville states that for all the splendour the meals of the Great Khan match those of Europe neither in cleanliness nor in amount – as one eats without a cloth upon one's knees, and only once a day (Seymour 1967, 158-9).

The Isle of Formosa

We now turn to a different part of Asia, the isle of Formosa, modern-day Taiwan. From this remote island far, far to the East came a young man to Europe in the dawn of the 18th century and told the amazing story of his travels, giving a complete description of Formosa – so he said. This man is none other than the very George Psalmanazar introduced above.

However, this does not mean that there existed no information to which his account could have been compared. A Portuguese ship blown off course had discovered the isle for Europe in 1583 and named it ‘Ilha formosa’, ‘wonderful Island’ (Weggel 1991, 5). In 1624 the Dutch erected a first base in the south of Formosa. The natives themselves qualified for primitives in the eyes of their discoverers: Their societies were tribally organized hunter-gatherer communities, without knowledge of metalworking and cultivating customs like head-hunting. In 1626 the Spaniards established themselves in the north; Dominican friars founded a permanent residence to evangelise the natives. The Spaniards left in 1642, providing an opportunity for the Dutch to enlarge their influence. Between 1624 and 1661 the Dutch included large parts of Formosa into their dominion and erected far-reaching patterns of authority (Keevak 2004, 17). During the years 1670 – 1681 the East India Company ran a trading post on Formosa (Birley 1982, 384) using an abandoned Dutch outpost as base (Keevak 2004, 18). In Europe, empirical documentation material was at hand.

The Psalmanazarian Formosa looks quite different. To begin, it is not only beautiful, but indeed the queen of islands:

THE Island Formosa (...) is one of the most Pleasant and Excellent of all the Asiatick Isles, whether we consider the convenient situation, the healthful air, the fruitful soil, or the curious Springs and useful Rivers, and rich Mines of Gold and Silver wherewith it abounds; for it enjoys many advantages which other Islands want, and wants none of those which they have. (Penzer 1926, 131)⁴

This satisfies all traditional European preconceptions of the Asiatic isle; fruitful, healthy, full of riches. Yet almost no part of the description fits on the island we know as Taiwan today. Especially the part arousing European fantasy most, the gold, was entirely fictional. But it was a topos he could not drop – it lent a lot of credibility to his tale, having strong traditional support. Not only the authors of antiquity told of Asia the rich, the Bible did as well (Gen 2,11/2,12), just as Marco Polo, Mandeville (Polo 2003, 259-60/Seymour 1967,

4 This is an edition of the first print of Psalmanazar’s ‘Description’ (1704). Italics and capitalization follow the author; all Psalmanazar quotes in the text are taken from the same edition and treated likewise.

138)⁵ and many other travel writers. He strained it a bit, for the overabundance of gold on his Formosa was almost too much – they made dishes from it and thatched houses to use up the enormous stocks (Penzer 1926, 216).

But that was not the end. There was everything in plenty that Europe longed for: Silk, cotton interwoven with gold and silver, China-earth, silken Paper, all products of eastern art and craftsmanship Europe could not satisfyingly produce itself (Penzer 1926, 217). The products of man were equalled only by those of nature; there were trees that held spirituous liquors in their fruits, stronger than Brandy, edible roots that could be harvested thrice a year, all kinds of fruits that England had, and all she lacked on top (Penzer 1926, 230-2). This self-sufficient abundance corresponds closely to Jesuit descriptions of China (Ricci 1617, 7-8), which Psalmanazar could have known as the pupil of a Jesuit school he had once been, and which were ascribed high value as information about Asia. As has long been known, he also incorporated material from other writers as Varenus and Candidius (Chevalley 1927, 308/Biron 1912, 791).

The beasts that roamed woods and fields show Psalmanazar again drawing on unlimited resources. All known continents supplied species for the Formosan bestiary:

Generally speaking all the Animals which breed here, are to be found in Formosa; but there are many others (...), as Elephants, Rhinocerots, Camels, Sea-Horses, all which are tame, and very useful for the service of Man. But they have other wild Beasts there (...), as Lyons, Boars, Wolves, Leopards, Apes, Tygers, Crocodiles; and there are also wild Bulls, which are more fierce than any Lyon or Boar, (...) (Penzer 1926, 234)

The part about the '*Sea-Horses*' is especially instructive. Regarding their usefulness for man, there must have been some confusion on the side of Psalmanazar as to what a sea horse was. This is another clue that points to him relying on information and topoi handed down through the ages. He seems to have thought of the antique Hippocampi harnessed to Poseidon's chariot, creatures with the forepart of a horse and a fishtail. These creatures could, indeed, have served as draft animals on water – while this is rather inconceivable for a sea horse proper. But Psalmanazar is delicate in his choice of topics: The age-old fiction of the unicorn that Marco Polo had incorporated was discarded. The animal in question had in the meantime been identified as a rhinoceros. What was no longer state-of-the-art popular knowledge could not support his story, and was of no avail to him.

What was just highly improbable, not impossible, could be used. His bestiary included animals from different climates and ecosystems –deserts: camels;

5 Note that the island both works refer to in this context is not Formosa/Taiwan, but Java. As they both don't mention Formosa at all, this island offers the best possibility of comparison with respect to location, size, and remoteness to the author.

savannas: elephants and lions; forests, jungles: wolves, apes, tigers, boars; large swamps, rivers: crocodiles. The little archipelago Psalmanazar construed could never have space enough to maintain such biodiversity – but among his contemporaries were few who could argue against it. To most of his readers each of these animals stood as a token of the exotic; to qualify Formosa as the most exotic place under the eastern sun it was useful to present as many as possible.

Even more convincing than an exotic fauna was an exotic populace. So the Formosans, cultured and learned as they are, walk almost naked eye under the sun (Penzer 1926, 204-6) they otherwise systematically avoid, living underground if possible (Penzer 1926, 197). Their religion is a twisted resemblance of judeo-christian-islamic monotheism, preached by a prophet to whom the holy book is revealed, his god giving commandments and demanding total submission. The similarity to Mohammed is surely not coincidental; so Psalmanazar could evoke the negative connotations of Islam prevailing in Europe to underline the grim mood of his Formosan god, making clear this religion was foreign, pagan and despicable.

Psalmanazar's account seems strange from the beginning, even if we suppose not to know about its fictionality. Too much is either highly improbable or clearly identifiable as traditional topoi without any other foundation. The gross inconsistencies that distort otherwise unsuspecting parts of the text, such as the zoological description, point away from a description mode resting on empirical observation; frequent utilization of emblematic information mainly employed because of their connotative value also does. Psalmanazar gives his statements based on authority, the *auctoritas* of antiquity or the Middle Ages, or of widely circulated beliefs and suppositions. His mode of description is, as Mandeville's, prescriptive, bound to the past and based on it. That both Mandeville and Psalmanazar wrote their books as eyewitnesses is not due to an empirical attitude but to genre conventions of the travelogue. We cannot ask, '*What if Psalmanazar was right?*', because to do this, we would have to accept his methodology, as his results cannot be grounded in any other way. As this method is diametrically opposite to our mode of scientific procedure, we cannot recognize his results as scientific. That does not mean they are useless: They tell us a lot about how contemporary thinking operated when it calculated the probabilities of what was told about the foreign. But we cannot employ Psalmanazar's account as a counterfactual tool, only as a source for researches concerning quasi non-empirical topics as 'thinking foreignness'.

Lilliput

Just as the fake Formosan, ship-surgeon Lemuel Gulliver was a mere phantom that did not exist outside his story. He apparently gave an account of his visits

to some remote islands where no European had ever set foot before⁶. Lilliput lay in the Indian Ocean, nearer to Van Diemens Land than to any known place (Swift 2005, 16-7); Brobdingnag was a peninsula of North America (Swift 2005, 76-7), near legendary Quivira; Laputa, Balnibarbi, Luggnagg and Glubbudrib lay west of Japan (Swift 2005, 142-3), and Houyhnhnm's Land somewhere in unmapped southern seas, towards what was conceived as Magellania; not exactly locatable, somewhere south or south-west of 'New-Holland', Australia (Swift 2005, 265-7). Captain Cook would not sail to these seas for sixty years to come, so Swift could use these blank spaces on Europe's map of the world as a projection screen for his imagination. As they all were undiscovered, what might be there was subject to prefigured expectations, but the Age of Discoveries frequently brought to light things unexpected.

By setting an impossible standard of veracity, which requires talking to ghosts and visiting nonexistent places, he alone can confirm the existence of pygmies, giants, flying islands, and talking horses. (Rabb 2006, 345)

Though utterly satirical in intention, Gulliver's four books are formally similar to contemporary travelogues. They accurately describe faraway lands and peoples, with full detail of their situation, customs, history, the extent and nature of their regions and much more. In this they cling to many of the preconceptions mentioned above (Smith 1990, 106). And so they had to, if Gulliver's travels should appear credibly. Satire is impotent if we cannot imagine the setting as real. For if not, we do not feel the sting. On the other hand, the best lie is said to be 90 percent truth. Still better is what could pass for pure truth if only the conditions were slightly different. To specify those conditions, and as only one country is picked from each text, one of the four islands Gulliver visits will be examined closer.

Lilliput soon became the place about one had to have read, and it very much formed our conception of Gulliver's travels and of pygmies in general. Yet it was not too strange to be unbelievable. That was due to its connections with traditional topoi: Dwarfs were an established figure of superstition, fairy-tale, and legend, and pygmies were equally known in educated circles, if only for disliking cranes. The existence of little men was not problematic, even if Lilliput's dimensions were disturbing, at least for Gulliver – a Lilliputian measuring merely 6 inches is to Gulliver as 1 to 1728 (Swift 2005, 38-9), which makes accommodation very unpleasant. Furthermore, Lilliputian society closely resembles European social orders. It is ruled by an Emperor whose powers are checked by the nobles of the blood (Swift 2005, 25), the government is run by ministers chosen by ability (Swift 2005, 33-4), albeit the ability to rope-dance skillfully. There is a standing army at His Majesty's command, well-ordered

⁶ With the only exception of a short stay in Japan, where few had been and almost no one had been allowed to be for about 60 years.

and disciplined (Swift 2005, 35), cities are laid out square, walled, and well-populated, the metropolis housing 500.000 souls (Swift 2005, 40). Compared to contemporary Europe, everything seems familiar except the city shape; yet the square city is not only a prominent feature of utopian literature⁷, representing the superiority of reason over the chaos of unregulated society, but an image of foreign civilization as well, as Chinese and Aztec cities were reported to be laid out like this. The link to antiquity was given, too, as Roman *coloniae* were founded quadratically. Square cities were not only familiar to European readers, but also signified a highly developed foreign culture.

Lilliputian law is given by the king, but old customs are clung to as well. Therefore, what His Majesty commands and what the people's sense of propriety imposes may clash, causing civil unrest, disorder, ultimately rebellion. Six rebellions have been caused by the imperial edict that eggs shall be broken at their smaller end instead of the larger as of old (Swift 2005, 43). This may sound less odd when we consider that quarrels over how many persons may eat a small piece of bread caused strife and bloodshed on a much greater scale in Europe.⁸

Especially British readers could easily perceive the analogies between the Lilliputian system and their own (Rabb 2006, 338). These similarities make the satire work, and contribute to the credibility of the tale. Yet similarities are dangerous to trust, as Mandeville and Psalmanazar have shown. What they related was founded on similarities with contemporary images and thus credible, but cannot be legitimated this way today. To be useful as a counterfactual scenario, the description of Lilliput must be founded on something other than similarities alone.

Gulliver looks and listens, and then tells. He gathers his information empirically from his surroundings⁹ and is eager to have them reproduced in print (Swift 2005, 7). It is not in his power to change the seen, he has for good or bad to describe it as it is. These data provide material for his rare reasoning. Mostly he only reports and does not analyse. But when analysing, he applies the causal logic of natural philosophy to his materials, as in pondering how the visual powers of the Lilliputians have been adapted to their size, making them see very sharp but not far (Swift 2005, 51).

May we ask '*What if Gulliver was right?*' now? We could, but we do not know exactly what to compare him to. There is no direct empirical counterpart to Lilliput, and though very probably the duo Lilliput/Blefuscu corresponds to England/France, the gap is too wide to claim direct comparison. Yet, Lilliput could serve as a distorting mirror to provide new perspectives on European society in the 18th century. This is possible only because it is not just counter-

7 For instance, the 54 cities on Utopia are square: Ritter 1983, 62.

8 Though Swift would perhaps not have approved of this analogy (Casement 1992, 538).

9 For his sensual impressions concerning Lilliput see especially: Swift 2005, 17-20.

factual but written in an empirical, present-bound mode of description fitting into our conceptions of science.

Conclusion

The examination shows that two of the accounts, those by Marco Polo and Swift, match the criteria set up for counterfactuality, whereas those by Mandeville and Psalmanazar do not. This implies that the posed discrepancy between fictionality and counterfactuality is not given – no direct connection between an account's fictionality and its usefulness as a counterfactual scenario could be established. The least fictional account viewed here, Marco Polo's, is usable as a scientific tool as well as the most fictional, *Gulliver's Travels*.

Whether a counterfactual account is usable as tool for scientific enquiry or not is directly related to structural features of the account and not to features of content. We can use these accounts as tools for enlarging our perspective on a subject, to further understanding of processes by looking at their possible alternative results, but only when they fit our pattern of methodology. As modern science since Francis Bacon is empirically based, descriptive and present-bound, accounts seeking validation along other lines of thought leave the scope of possible alternative scenarios. The division between constructs of ideas fit for use as tools of science and those not has to be drawn not along the line of factual versus counterfactual, but along that of descriptive versus prescriptive thought.

Comparisons with such counterfactuals as counterparts have at least two more beneficial effects. If we use 'could-have-been'-scenarios we can avoid the danger of being accused of making our scenarios fit our theses. The conventional 'what if...?'-scenarios provide alternative views through which the importance of historical events may be cleared and understanding of the inherent processes of these events be furthered. Yet they may have an aftertaste of being invented to produce the desired outcome, and therefore of little evaluative value. Furthermore, of the snowballing number of alternatives in counterfactual history, only few can be analyzed.

Both these problems can be overcome by using existing fictional accounts as our basis for counterfactual argumentation: it shows us a possible alternative picture of the examined, a could-have-been we do not have to pursue towards a multiverse of probabilities, taking it as the endpoint of the processes upon which we reflect. As the material is given and has not been devised by the researcher himself, he cannot be accused to make up conditions to suit his wishes. They provide another viewpoint – a counterpart for comparison – from which a deeper understanding of the processes underlying the examined events may be derived. And it opens a new perspective for historical comparisons, as we get a possibility to substitute the empirical counterpart with the could-have-been.

This does not implicate posing judgement of the absolute value of the examined accounts. What if a scientific paradigm shift happened tomorrow? The qualifications I made may well be reversed, and Mandeville and Psalmanazar rise again. So a further, subtle gain of such tools may be proposed: As the definition of what can be used as counterfactual depends fundamentally on our conception of the nature of science, in the choice of our examples a chance for self-reflection opens. Where we draw the line between scientific fiction and mere fable may tell us what science is to us, and which basic patterns of reasoning and verification we use.

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