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Editorial: Unpredictability, Contingency and Counterfactuals

Roland Wenzlhuemer *

Abstract: »*Unvorhersehbarkeit, Kontingenz und das Kontrafaktische*«. While it has always been present in our everyday-life practices, counterfactual thinking currently stages a comeback as a scientific method. Of late, a renewed interest in counterfactuals can be witnessed in academic disciplines that have traditionally been suspicious of studying events or processes that have never happened (and will never happen). Is it mere coincidence that an impressive number of unconnected initiatives have started to re-discuss counterfactual thinking at the same time? Or are we living through times that somehow foster such a renewed interest in unpredictability, contingency and counterfactuals?

Keywords: contingency, counterfactual thinking.

Ours are unstable times. While historians will rightly hold that in the past we easily find any number of periods of unpredictability and instability, this does not alter the current prevalence of a general feeling of insecurity as to what the future might hold. At the time of writing in February 2009 the industrialized countries are experiencing (the early phase of) an economic depression unheard of for almost a century. Mistrust in the financial and economic system has reached a level that questions the very foundations of this system – which has been built on credit and, therefore, on trust. Very early in the crisis, observers have already heralded the end of capitalism as we know it. Should such prognoses come true this would mean nothing else but the collapse of the second allegedly infallible economic (and ideological) world order within twenty years – leaving the populace to a largely unpredictable future.

Furthermore, the terrorist attacks in New York City, London and Madrid together with the prevailing chaos in Afghanistan and Iraq have been challenging established global power relations since the turn of the new millennium. The nation state, it seems, has reached the limits of its power and lacks the means to successfully confront terrorism and piracy (for instance around the horn of Africa). At the same time, representatives of nation states have frequently transgressed hitherto inviolable borders while trying to keep the upper hand. Democratic ideals and human rights have been spurned over and over again. Thereby, established value systems have been called into

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question and moral compasses disturbed. On top of this, rarely a day goes by without new alarming data on the speed and potential consequences of global warming – which, in essence, questions the future of mankind as we know it.

Therefore, ours are unstable times, indeed. No doubt about it. Prognoses as to the future of the nation state, the capitalist system or the global climate are hard to make. Just as many former real estate owners, blue collar workers and bank employees find it hard to make any predictions regarding their own future. The certainties of previous decades are things of the past. Hardly anything seems predetermined anymore. And exactly in these unstable times, there seems to be renewed interest in a field that has existed at the very periphery of academic investigation for decades – counterfactual thinking. While present in many different disciplines and forms of research, this particular style of enquiry has mainly been discussed in the historical sciences as counterfactual, virtual or alternate history. In the 1960s and 1970s, forays into the field have mostly been unsystematic and without any theoretical backing. Criticism from “factual” colleagues in the discipline has, however, been all the more outspoken. The condemning comments of both E. H. Carr and E. P. Thompson are well-known and still summarize much of the traditional reservations against counterfactual history.

Only in the 1980s, a German historian, Alexander Demandt, finally made a powerful argument in favour of counterfactual thinking in history. In his book *Ungeschehene Geschichte*, Demandt did not only make the case for counterfactual reasoning, he also took up the other side’s most powerful arguments and replied in a thoughtful but convincing way. To me, his thin treatise is still the best discussion of counterfactuals and their potential usefulness in historical enquiry that we have to date. Although widely read, *Ungeschehene Geschichte* did not trigger a substantial discussion of the issue. Only in the mid-1990s another well-known historian took up the cause and published an edited volume with an insightful introduction written by himself. Niall Ferguson’s *Virtual History* roused more interest – probably due both to the author’s growing reputation in Anglo-American academia as well as to the “juicier” case studies that the contributing authors discussed. While many of the contributions to *Virtual History* were well-researched and methodologically sound, the book triggered a wave of less academic publications in the field that tried to appeal to a wider readership. To critics of counterfactual enquiry, these volumes simply proved what was wrong with the approach. Many case studies were far-fetched, selected more on grounds of their dramatic promises than their historical relevance. Conclusions remained speculative. No traces of a sound methodology or structured historical enquiry could be found. *Quod erat demonstrandum*.

In the field of history, not much of substance has been published on counterfactual thinking since Ferguson’s volume. But today, all of a sudden, we see a renewed interest in all things counterfactual. Together with the

philosopher Rayk Meckel, the author gave an interdisciplinary seminar on counterfactual thinking at the University of Lucerne in the summer term of 2007. The seminar attracted a diverse but very dedicated crowd of students and – somewhat to the surprise of the lecturers – seemed to strike a long neglected chord. Motivated by the students’ positive feedback, we decided to try and bring together “counterfactualists” from different fields and countries at a workshop to be held at Humboldt-University in Berlin in September 2008. While we initially doubted that we would be able to mobilize a critical mass of attendees and contributors, we were surprised at the amount and quality of the feedback. Most contributors to this volume have attended the workshop, presented a paper and participated in the discussions. Therefore, the content of this special issue closely mirrors the structure of the workshop and reflects the key topics and results of our discussions. It is also the product of the attendees’ shared belief that a keen exchange between the different disciplines about the practical application of counterfactuals is essential, if the analytical potential of counterfactual thinking should be illustrated. The workshop has been a first attempt at collecting, juxtaposing, comparing and then eventually merging the very diverse definitions of counterfactuals or counterfactuality that are employed in the different disciplines. The contributions in this volume build on the workshop presentations but also consider and integrate the discussions held and the common ground identified at the workshop.

While putting together the workshop and contacting potential attendees, we learned of a host of similar initiatives and interest groups. In October 2007, graduate students organized a conference on *Goofy History* discussing all sorts of unusual interpretations of the past – among them counterfactual histories. The *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* published a *Folio* special issue on “Was wäre, wenn...” in which writers, essayists and other public persons presented their very own “might-have-been” or “could-have-been” scenarios. At the newly established FRIAS School of Language & Literature at the University of Freiburg, an interdisciplinary workshop on counterfactual thinking to be hosted later this year is currently being organized. This gathering will broach the issue mainly from a literature and culture perspective. Eventually, days before our own workshop took place, we learned that at the University of Konstanz, a research focus on counterfactuality had just been granted and was soon to be implemented.

So, after all these years of neglect and peripheral existence, where does all this renewed interest in counterfactual questions come from? Is there, indeed, some connection to the real and the perceived instability of our times? While I clearly see the danger of overestimating the power and appeal of counterfactuals, I would very much like to think that there is some connection. When future developments seem largely unpredictable and highly contingent, the degree of predetermination and unavoidability of the course of history must be freshly assessed as well. Both communism as well as capitalism (for a long

time the opposites in a bipolar but reasonably stable/predictable world order) have traditionally been styled as the products of a largely preprogrammed process of evolution that could not but culminate either in communism or in capitalism respectively. The former has, from its very inception, been based on the Marxist version of historical determinism – the belief that history would inevitably lead to the idealized rule of the proletariat. In the case of the latter, the determinism was of a subtler breed. But publications such as Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History* or the constant repetition of the formula “There Is No Alternative” clearly illustrate the deterministic element in capitalist self-reflection. But what now? As an economic system, communism has utterly collapsed. And while its fate is not entirely clear, it seems that capitalism as we know it might follow suit. Not only has the perceived stability of a bipolar world order long since come to an end – both economic systems (cum ideology) have failed despite their self-styled terminal position in the evolution. Predetermination, it seems, only goes so far. Is history, after all, more contingent than we liked to believe? And might it, therefore, be more relevant and illuminating to think about potential alternative historical courses than we previously thought? I would very much like to think so but can, of course, offer no substantial proof for the connection between our unstable times and the renewed interest in counterfactual thinking.

It seems perfectly clear, however, that the work that psychologists have done on counterfactual thinking since the early 1990s has paved the way for the current revival of the issue in other disciplines. Researchers such as Tycocinski, Markman or Roese have successfully shown in hundreds of experimental studies that counterfactual thinking in everyday-life situations can – under certain circumstances – be extremely useful for the thinker. After all, there seems to be some use crying over spilt beans (or milk) – at least if the crying is followed by some serious thinking about possible but unrealized alternatives. Largely without knowing and certainly without intending to, these psychologist have provided a powerful argument supporting the analytical usefulness of counterfactuals and thereby countering the standard charge of many critics in history and other disciplines. It has been one of the goals of our workshop and of this volume to build on such psychological research and to show how the same or very similar analytical mechanisms can be employed in an academic context.

This volume, therefore, opens with a contribution by the American psychologists Neal Roese and Mike Morrison on “The Psychology of Counterfactual Thinking”. The authors show how and in which situations we think counterfactually and which benefits can come from the practice. The article illustrates how counterfactual thinking can highlight causal relations (causal inference effect) or invoke contrasting scenarios (contrast effect). My own text on “Counterfactual Thinking as a Scientific Method” tries to follow up on this. It recapitulates how exactly such effects work in everyday-life

situations and then seeks to translate them into an academic context. First, I do so from a general, interdisciplinary viewpoint. Later in the text I focus particularly on the usefulness of counterfactual thinking in the field of history. Towards the end, I also try to offer some words of caution when I highlight the potential pitfalls associated with historical counterfactuals. Again, most of these have a counterpart in everyday-life counterfactuals as well.

Together with this editorial these two contributions form the introductory part of the special issue and seek to build a bridge between counterfactual thinking in everyday life, its potential uses in academic research in general and its application in history in particular. The following three texts are mainly concerned with counterfactual history, its status within the discipline and its potential uses. Working at the interface between history and political science, Richard Lebow uses “counterfactuals to probe the limits of theory and to develop better means of understanding causation in a largely open-ended, non-linear highly contingent world.” In his contribution “Counterfactuals, History and Fiction” he, however, also refers to recent experiments that have shown how a protagonist’s beliefs and world view influence his/her attitude towards or choice of counterfactuals in history. In doing so, Lebow highlights how personal biases can produce different counterfactual alternatives and, thereby, different interpretations of the past. In a similar vein, Georg Schmid in “Counterfactuals and Futures Histories; Retrospective Imagining as an Auxiliary for the Scenarios of Expectance” illustrates how our expectations influence the nature of our counterfactuals. Schmid aptly puts forward that many different pasts compete with one allegedly correct or real past for *Interpretationshoheit* (the monopoly of interpretation) of history. While concerned mainly with historical counterfactuals, the contribution also manages to connect past, present and future counterfactuals via the “scenarios of expectance”. Ann Talbot’s article on “Chance and Necessity in History: E.H Carr and Leon Trotsky Compared” links up with Lebow’s experiments and shows how attitudes towards historical counterfactuals depend on someone’s general beliefs about the laws (if any) of history. Talbot uses the British historian E. H. Carr – an outspoken critic of counterfactual methods in historical research – as an example to show that a belief in historical determinism and an evolutionary course of history makes the serious contemplation of counterfactual alternatives very difficult. To further illustrate this point, the author contrasts Carr’s views with those of Isaiah Berlin and Leon Trotsky.

Geoffrey Winthrop-Young leads over from the counterfactual history part of the special issue to the third section that explores how counterfactual thinking is – often as a matter of course – employed in disciplines or professions other than history. His article “Fallacies and Thresholds: Notes on the Early Evolution of Alternate History” reconstructs the founding decade of the Science Fiction subgenre Alternate History and traces the uses and functions

that counterfactuals can have in a literary context. Helmut Weber then takes the reader into the allegedly dry and strictly fact-based realm of the law. In “The ‘But For’ Test and Other Devices –The Role of Hypothetical Events in the Law” he shows that many areas of modern jurisdiction are based on counterfactual enquiry which is a valid and, in fact, the only suitable means to re-construct an alternative reality against which a case’s reality has to be measured. The contributions of Jens Ennen and Ekaterina Svetlova then take us into the field of evaluation and forecasting in economics – another discipline in which counterfactuals are employed on a regular and rarely contested basis. In “The Evaluation of Welfare State Performance: Modelling a Counterfactual World” Ennen exemplifies how welfare state evaluation depends on counterfactual reasoning. In order to assess both their effectiveness and efficiency, welfare state reforms need to be tested against an unrealized alternative that can only be invoked with the help of counterfactuals. In Svetlova’s contribution ““Do I See What the Market Does Not See?: Counterfactual Thinking in Financial Markets”, portfolio managers resort to similar methods in order to perform better than the market in average. Apart from a worthwhile glimpse into the working environment of portfolio managers, Ekaterina Svetlova also offers a new and broader definition of counterfactual thinking that makes the term fit for explorations into the future.

The fourth and final section of the special issue brings us back to counterfactual history. It offers four specific historical case studies that employ counterfactual thinking as a method of enquiry. The section opens with Juliane Schiel’s article “Crossing Paths between East and West. The Use of Counterfactual Thinking for the Concept of ‘Entangled History’”. Schiel aptly illustrates how counterfactuals can be particularly useful when trying to disentangle “entangled histories” – a field of history that emphasizes the mutual connections between seemingly unrelated or distant regions, protagonists or even time periods. “Entangled history” does not lend itself to deterministic interpretations of the past and rather enforces a chaotic view of history. By using the early encounters between Mongols and Mendicants as an example, Juliane Schiel shows that counterfactual thinking can help us to make such chaotic and “entangled histories” somewhat easier to handle. Elke Ohnacker stresses how much care must be devoted to selecting the right counterfactual questions in historical enquiry – counterfactuals that seemed possible, plausible or even probable at the time. In her case study “What If... Charlemagne’s Other Sons had Survived? Charlemagne’s Sons and the Problems of Royal Succession” she uses established knowledge about Charlemagne’s time to ask new, counterfactual questions. Thereby, she demonstrates that good counterfactuals are never completely speculative but rather build on known material and practices which they expand and re-interpret. In a similar vein, Sören Philipps re-interprets a much more current event with the help of counterfactuals. In “The birth of the European Union:

Challenging the myth of the civilian power narrative” he picks a very probably point of bifurcation and explores what could have happened, had the European Defence Community been founded in 1954. Following Georg Schmid’s earlier lament about the inaccuracy of many metaphors used to describe alternative pasts and possible courses of history, Philipps suggests a new and somewhat less rigid metaphor – the cloud. Eventually, Tobias Winnerling sets out to explore “Invented Formosa, the Empire of the Great Khan and Lilliput: Can 18th century fiction be counterfactual?” Winnerling radically redefines the term counterfactuals and, thereby, questions the established way of thinking about counterfactuals. He proposes a new use for old travelogues and descriptions of the foreign that, from today’s point of view, cannot be considered sources of factual information anymore. Might they be usable as counterparts to empirical scenarios in historical comparisons, provided they can be qualified as counterfactual?

All contributions share the common goal to highlight how counterfactual thinking – i.e. thinking about something that never came to happen – can have very fruitful and worthwhile results in an everyday-life or in an academic context. At best, thinking counterfactually about the current state of the world, about a real or perceived feeling of instability and insecurity, might provide a first handle on the situation.