

Article:

COUNTERFACTUAL HISTORY: GOOD TEACHING, BAD HISTORY?

PART I

By Garfield Gini-Newman

“The road not taken belongs on the map”

For the past number of years I have attempted to juggle two consuming interests; firstly a love of teaching history, and secondly an interest in how learning occurs and what the impact of brain research is or should be having on how we teach history. Generally, these two interests have coincided nicely as brain research has shed light on why certain classroom practices are more effective than others. Yet, at times brain research and the study of history have not meshed so easily. While researching classroom strategies which promote brain growth (increase in the number of synaptic connections between dendrites) I was intrigued to come across activities which pose hypothetical questions. From the perspective of brain research, hypothetical questions force students to use their knowledge in creative ways as there is no correct answer to be found in history books. Speculating on what might have occurred is, in fact, a very challenging intellectual exercise which tests our deep understanding of historical events and causal relationships. Alas, asking hypothetical questions in history takes us into the realm of counterfactuals; an often criticized practice by many historians. Hence, my training as a historian had come into conflict with my deepening understanding of effective classroom practice.

Counterfactual or “what if” questions have long been considered forbidden territory for historians; a realm fraught with dangers better left to fantasy writers than academic historians. And yet, counterfactual history has also been referred to as a dirty secret or guilty pleasure of historians.

So, as the title of this article suggests, does the use of counterfactuals (or “What if History”) lead to good teaching but bad history? Can teachers of history make effective use of counterfactuals to engage the learner without misusing history? I believe that if properly used, counterfactual history can be an effective tool in the classroom without misrepresenting either the past or the historian’s craft. This article will explore the concerns over using counterfactual history and the means to allay these fears, suggest guidelines to follow when using counterfactual history, and suggest a number of practical strategies through which to use counterfactual history to engage students and develop their capacity for critical thinking.

The History of Counterfactual History

Counterfactual or “what if” questions have long been considered forbidden territory for historians; a realm fraught with dangers better left to fantasy writers than academic historians. And yet, counterfactual history has also been referred to as a dirty secret or guilty pleasure of historians. Historian Robert Cowley suggests that “what if” questions are the historians’ favourite secret question. Counterfactual thought has existed as long as the discipline itself. In his *Annals*, Tacitus pondered the implications had Germanicus lived a full life. The eighteenth century English historian Edward Gibbon, ventured into the realm of counterfactualism in his monumental work, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. In fact, popularity with counterfactual history seemed to continue to grow until the early twentieth century when prominent historians such as G.M. Trevelyan wrote essays such as “If Napoleon had won the battle of Waterloo.” Following World War One, counterfactual history fell out of favour with academic historians and has become relegated to the works of science fiction writers. Over the past

decade, counterfactual history has enjoyed somewhat of resurgence, albeit largely through the works of fiction and popular culture. Robert Harris' highly acclaimed novel *Fatherland*, imagines a world in which the Axis power won World War Two while the fictional works of Henry Turtledove and Harry Harrison build on the counterfactual scenarios. Recently, two volumes of counterfactual scenarios written by historians have been published. *What if?* considers over twenty different counterfactual scenarios dealing with military engagements, while *What if?2* explores alternate histories dealing with a wide variety of scenarios from what if Socrates had died during the Peloponnesian War to what if Martin Luther had been burned as a heretic? Despite the resurgence in popularity of counterfactual history, many academic historians remain skeptical.

Alexander the Great Dies at the Battle of the Granicus River, 334 BCE (from What if?)

On his first military campaign against the Persian empire, a young and daring Alexander was dealt a near fatal blow to the head by an axe-wielding Persian. His helmet badly damaged and staggering from the blow, Alexander would surely have died from a second blow from the axe. The second blow did not come, Alexander survived and the Persian empire was defeated. What would have been the impact on the ancient world of an early death of Alexander?

Hitler's Assassination is Successful

There were at least seven unsuccessful attempts on Hitler's life during World War Two. Many of the attempts failed through sheer chance. What if Hitler had not moved the briefcase loaded with a bomb and had died in 1943? Would the death of Hitler earlier in the war have changed the outcome of the war or the shape of the post-war world?

Al Gore Wins U.S. Election

The U.S. presidential election of 2000 will surely go down in history as one of the most bizarre. With Al Gore and George Bush deadlocked, the election hinged on the state of Florida where voting irregularities were wreaking havoc. What if Al Gore had won the election of 2000? Would American

foreign policy have looked any different? Would world events have followed the same path as they did under Bush?

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Historians Concerns

For much of the twentieth century, counterfactual history has been dismissed as bad history and suitable for nothing more than entertainment. E.H. Carr referred to it as "a mere parlour game", while E.P. Thompson rejected counterfactualism as "Geschichtswissenschaft, unhistorical shit". Undoubtedly, there are valid concerns over this use of "what if" scenarios in the study of history. Below are several concerns cited by academic historians and brief comments on how these concerns can be handled.

Concern #1

Counterfactuals can never be proven with any certainty.

- Counterfactual history is not a tool for reconstructing the past but rather re-imagining the past for the purpose of considering the significance of the events that did occur – it is in essence a creative tool for examining the impact of events and decisions which did take place – it is not a vehicle for the re-writing of history – in fact this is one of the great dangers of the irresponsible use of counter-factual history – an anti-Semitic could use counterfactualism to construct a twisted utopic view based on a Nazi victory and complete annihilation of the Jewish people.

Concern #2

There is a danger of re-creating the past as we would have liked it to have been, thereby creating a pre-conceived history.

- Irresponsible use of counterfactual history could lead down this path – but this is no different than the traditional historian who misuses history to support a biased point of view. Without using counterfactual history Adolph Hitler managed to twist and malign history to support his needs. Counterfactual history, like any other intellectual exercise must be done responsibly and needs to be scrutinized by academic peers – certainly fallacies in arguments can be challenged in traditional or alternate histories.

Concern #3

Cleopatra's nose – minor events are given enormous weight when it may not be justified.

- This is most definitely one of the most tempting traps into which historians using counter-factual history tend to fall. Yet, at the same time it reinforces the tremendous potential for counterfactual history. Underlying the fallacy of Cleopatra's nose is the assumption that Marc Antony lost because of his preoccupation with the beautiful Cleopatra. However, if Cleopatra was not beautiful then he would not have been distracted and would have won. Does historical evidence support the contention that Marc Antony lost due to his preoccupation with Cleopatra? What of the recent research which suggests Cleopatra was not a ravenous beauty? Scrutinizing the counterfactual conclusion in fact forces us to reconsider long held assumptions – so even when the counterfactual proves erroneous, it has historical merit.

Concern #4

Counterfactuals allow for the creation of arguments which cannot be rigorously scrutinized as they are as much a product of the

author's imagination as they are of the historical record.

- As shown above this is not true. Counterfactual conclusions are speculations which are built upon a body of historical evidence. Any alternate history which does not stand up to scrutiny and is merely the creation of an active imagination deserves to be rejected just as would traditional histories which are not based on historical evidence but instead are the product of the authors misguided assumptions

Chaos Theory and History

When we consider the implications of chaos theory it is generally in the area of mathematics or the natural sciences. Seldom is chaos theory applied to the arts or in particular to the study of history. And yet, chaos theory can be a very valuable tool of historical analysis. Consider the argument put forward by historian and avid counterfactualist Neil Ferguson:

...all that chaos theory says is that certain in realms of the natural world, particularly, say, for example, the weather, are governed by equations so complex, non-linear equations, that it's extremely difficult, indeed almost impossible, to predict patterns...the idea of a non-linear equation is simply that, yes, there are causal sequences which govern the weather, but they are so complex that the outcomes appear to be random and therefore are extremely hard to predict.

...chaos theory works very well for history because it says the world is actually governed by causal relationships, causation is real, but it's highly complex. And therefore to imagine that one can predict it or reduce it to a few simple linear laws is hopeless and fanciful.

Contrary to the concerns of traditional historians who decry the use its use, counterfactual history is, in fact, a valid and useful tool of the historian. By considering plausible alternative events, historians are forced to analyze historical situations without the benefit of hindsight and a knowledge of what would follow. Instead, they must consider events as did the

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historical players. For example, at what point was the Allied victory over the Axis powers virtually assured? Would the attempted assassinations of Hitler have made a significant difference to the course of the war and the post-war world had they been successful? These are not merely intriguing questions but historically significant questions as they force us to decide on the relative importance of various factors and events. It must be remembered that the job of the historian is to understand why an event happened, not just that it happened. Applying counterfactual questions can aid in the task of reconstructing the course of events and assessing the relative importance of historical events.

American historian Barbara Tuchman, in her highly acclaimed book, *The March of Folly*, examined several major historical blunders from the Trojan Horse to the Vietnam War, showing that in each case, leaders, despite clear warnings to the contrary, made fateful decisions with disastrous consequences. In each case, Tuchman is careful to consider only the warnings and evidence available at the time of the event so as not to be caught writing history with the aid of hindsight. Each of the decisions she critiques could just as easily have gone the other way had the leaders paid attention to the warning signals. How different would the world have been had leaders at these critical junctures listened to those around them? By posing counterfactual questions, we do not re-write history, but we do develop a clearer sense of the importance and implications of the decisions which were made.

Counterfactual History: Good Teaching, Bad History? Part II, which will appear in the next issue of *Rapport*, will examine practical suggestions for using counterfactual history in the classroom with a specific focus on using counterfactual history to develop critical thinking in students.

