



CALL FOR PROPOSALS

International workshop on

Counterfactual Thinking: “Parlour Game” or Analytical Tool?

28-29 November 2008
Centre for British Studies
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
Berlin, Germany

“If ‘ifs’ and ‘ands’ were pots and pans, there’d be no work for tinkers.” – “Wenn das Wörtchen ‘wenn’ nicht wär’...” – “Avec des ‘si’ et des ‘mais’, on mettrait Paris dans une bouteille.” – “Če čebula ne bi imela če, bi bila bula.”

Most modern languages know one or more proverbs or expressions that refer to the commonness (and alleged pointlessness) of “what if”- or “what might have been”-thinking in our everyday life. While these sayings try to remind us that losing oneself in “ifs” and “ands” usually has little impact on any particular problem at hand, the psychologist Neal Roese has shown that so-called counterfactual thinking indeed has beneficial effects for the thinker. In short, counterfactual reasoning allows us to assess the potential of a past situation and to thereby learn about causalities and possible alternatives.

Surely not every counterfactual thought we have is close enough to what realistically could have happened to allow for such a learning process (“*What if Martians had abducted my history Prof just before the exam...*”), yet others definitely are (“*What if I had learned more for the history exam...*”). Therefore it seems that some of our counterfactual thinking is indeed – if unconsciously – goal-oriented and beneficial, while some of it merely serves to entertain or distract.

Now, what if we try to employ counterfactual thinking beyond our day-to-day experiences in contexts that usually demand sober and highly analytical approaches? In the scientific world, for instance, historians have long since used counterfactual assumptions as an additional means to test causalities and assess the importance of individual historical factors and protagonists. In jurisprudence, the “but for”-question is asked to gain a better understanding of the actual consequences of a particular misbehaviour. Beyond the intention to entertain and distract, utopian and dystopian writers have used counterfactual settings and plots to draw attention to social and/or political grievances. Conspiracy theorists resort to ways of explaining past or contemporary events that contradict what the majority accepts as “facts”. Finally, in all professions and contexts that aim at the constant pushing forward of frontiers

(e.g. of knowledge, technology, space etc.) thought experiments can provide the thinkers with new impulses and a creative elbow room that is necessary to leave the established path of investigation. These examples suggest that the analytical and systematic employment of counterfactual thinking can serve as a method to open hitherto overlooked perspectives on a familiar problem.

However, the deployment of counterfactual approaches in analytical contexts has also received a fair share of criticism. Particularly, practitioners of “counterfactual history” have drawn much of the fire. They have been accused of pursuing a mere “parlour game” (EH Carr) or “Geschichtswissenschaftslopf” (EP Thompson) without any practical use or providing any additional understanding of history. To some the historical disciplines with their traditional reliance on historical facts (and a certain weakness for positivist or teleological explanations) appear to be a particularly unlikely field for counterfactual analysis.

And other examples of counterfactual reasoning lend themselves readily to criticism as well. Philosophical thought experiments, for instance, have been denounced as “armchair philosophy” (KV Wilkes). Or in a different regard one might argue that highlighting contemporary social or political grievances might work better with a clear (and fact-based) relation to the context instead of transplanting the plot into a utopian/dystopian setting far removed from our reality. Conspiracy theories provide yet another example. Especially many of the better-known conspiracy theories have grown into highly complex and often unfathomable conglomerates of plots and subplots that offer few additional insights and certainly do not employ analytical tools such as Occam’s or Hanlon’s razors.

Thus, the question whether developing counterfactual scenarios in contexts beyond our everyday experiences can further our understanding of causalities and provide scope for creative thinking is far from resolved. This workshop aims to bring together scholars from a multiplicity of different disciplines in order to discuss the potential gains and the possible pitfalls of thinking (and teaching) counterfactuals. Workshop presentations can focus on any example of counterfactual thinking that aims at providing a deeper (or alternative) understanding of a particular subject (e.g. in academia, politics, society etc). All presentations should, however, be guided by the principle question whether counterfactual approaches can be more than mere entertainment and distraction. If yes, in which contexts can such approaches be employed? Is there a set of rules that one must adhere to when developing counterfactual scenarios?

The workshop is organized jointly by the University of Lucerne and Humboldt-Universität, Berlin. The organizers are looking forward to receiving proposals for presentations of not more than 500 words. Proposals both from advocates and critics of counterfactual methods are welcome in order to ensure a fruitful and balanced discussion.

Please send your proposal in word or pdf format to Rayk Meckel (rayk.meckel@unilu.ch) or Roland Wenzlhuemer (roland.wenzlhuemer@staff.hu-berlin.de) until 30 June 2008.