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## **Historical counterfactuals, transition periods and the constraints on imagination.**

### **Abstract**

The history of how philosophers have dealt with thought experiments in science is the main focus of this special issue. Counterfactual analysis is an interesting subset of thought experiments because it requires the imagination of alternative states of the world (cf also Fearon (1996), Lebow & Stein (1996), Reiss (2009), Tetlock and Belkin (1996) who suggest the same). In historical analysis, the use of imagination is often the focus of criticisms of such counterfactual analysis. In this paper I consider three strategies for constraining imagination; making limited counterfactual changes, limiting counterfactual changes to decisions of important figures, and using evidence to restrict the scope for imagination. Given the focus of this special issue, I will relate this discussion to Lewis' and Woodward's analysis of counterfactuals in the philosophy of science. I show that counterfactual analysis in historical cases has some resemblance to Lewis' and Woodward's analysis, but that what Lewis calls "transition periods" cannot be left entirely vague, as Lewis suggests, nor can counterfactual changes be seen simply as interventions, as Woodward suggests. I propose that efforts to limit imagination in historical counterfactuals are ultimately problematic, but that imagination can nevertheless play a useful role in counterfactual analysis.

### **Introduction**

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changes be seen simply as interventions, as Woodward suggests. I propose that efforts to limit imagination in historical counterfactuals are ultimately problematic, but that imagination can nevertheless play a useful role in counterfactual analysis.

### **Transition periods**

Historians and novelists have engaged in counterfactual speculation for centuries. Evans outlines, in some detail, the history of counterfactual analysis by historians and novelists. He describes how speculation about how things could have been different is found in texts ranging from the Roman historian Livi's "speculation on what might have happened had Alexander the Great conquered Rome, to Marti Joan de Galba's 1490 romance *Tirant lo Blanc*, which imagined a world in which the Byzantine Empire defeated the Ottoman Empire and not the other way around" (2014, pg. 11-12). There is also a respectable tradition of using counterfactuals to assess claims about causation in the social sciences; I focus on Lewis & Woodward in this regard. Fearon suggests that "When trying to argue or assess whether some factor A caused event B, social scientists frequently use counterfactuals" (1996, pg. 39). Tetlock and Belkin go further, suggesting that counterfactual analysis is "unavoidable in any field in which researchers want to draw cause-effect conclusions but cannot perform controlled experiments" (1996, pg. 6). Nevertheless, as far as historians are concerned, counterfactual history has often been seen just as speculation, rather than a part of serious historical analysis. Carr famously described it as a "parlour game" (1961, pg. 97). The criticism levelled at counterfactual history is often that it involves the use of too much imagination, and is without evidential foundation. However, what is less discussed in the literature is the attempts historians have made to use the technical concept of a 'transition period' to constrain these flights of fancy and put them on a surer academic footing.

Transition periods are the time in which historians make changes to enable a counterfactual change to be made. For example, I may say 'If I hadn't had whiskey with breakfast, I wouldn't have argued with my colleagues.' In order for me not to have had whiskey with breakfast I need to make counterfactual changes to the real historical record to enable me to have drunk another beverage. Perhaps I suppose that while shopping the previous night I bought orange juice, rather than whiskey. The changes we make to the historical record that enable counterfactual changes to be made are called 'backtracking

changes', and the period in which these changes are made is the transition period. In the example above, it is difficult to understand what we mean by 'Alexander conquering Rome', without explaining how the historical record has to have been different to enable his conquering. To fill in the details of this counterfactual we rewrite history during the transition period to make it possible for him to have conquered Rome.

### **Lewis and Minimal counterfactual changes**

Most counterfactual analyses begin with Lewis (1979) who outlines two analyses of counterfactuals. Most of the discussion of Lewis focusses on his second analysis, which is the more general treatment. This analysis applies to counterfactuals like 'had more countries been democracies in the twentieth century then there would have been fewer wars during that time', which is a counterfactual that has been much discussed in political science. However, it is worth reviewing his first analysis because this applies to particular time periods, which is what a large number of historians do, when they undertake counterfactual analysis. This is Lewis' first analysis of counterfactuals:

#### **Analysis 1**

"These types of counterfactuals take the form 'if it were that A, then it would be that C', where A is entirely about affairs in a stretch of time  $t_a$ . Consider all those possible worlds  $w$  such that:

1 A is true at  $w$ .

2  $w$  is exactly like our actual world at all times before a transition period beginning shortly before  $t_a$ .

3  $w$  conforms to the actual laws of nature at all times after  $t_a$

4 during  $t_a$  and the preceding transition period,  $w$  differs no more from our actual world than it must to permit A to hold.

The counterfactual is true iff C holds at every such world  $w$ ." (1979, pg. 462)

Lewis explicitly incorporates a transition period into his analysis. Using his analysis, we take the actual past up until just before we want to consider a counterfactual occurrence and make a few changes in this transition period to enable the counterfactual to occur. In doing this we avoid “gratuitous difference from the actual present” (1979, pg. 463). Then we make the counterfactual change and let the situation evolve according to the actual laws of nature. Lewis also notes that there may be a “variety of ways” in which the transition period can be filled out, so there may be no true counterfactuals that “say in any detail how the immediate past would be if the present were different” (1979, pg. 463). As will be clear from the subsequent discussion, historians largely follow the same outline as Lewis’s Analysis 1, but do not usually cite him as a source for their methodology.

Although Lewis does include a transition period in his analysis, he advocates leaving what happens in the transition period vague. He says,

“There may be a variety of ways the transition period might go, hence there may be no true counterfactuals that say in any detail how the immediate past would be if the present were different. I hope not, since if there were a definite and detailed dependence, it would be hard for me to say why some of this dependence should not be interpreted- wrongly, of course- as backward causation over short intervals of time...” (1979, pg. 463)

In other words, the transition period may be fleshed out in a variety of ways. What Lewis seems to be saying here is just that, if we leave it unclear what happens in the transition period, with no specifics on how the transition period is filled out, then we avoid pointing to anything of which it could be said that it is being caused by our counterfactual change. This seems odd, for the very basic reason that although we may leave the transition period unclear, this does not mean that we don’t have various alternative events in mind.

Lewis’ counterfactual analysis initially seems to leave little room for imagination. The transition period remains as close to the real past as possible and the specific changes in this period are left vague. The counterfactual then plays out in accordance with the laws of nature. However, things are not as simple as this. In stipulating that the transition period should deviate from the actual world as little as possible, we are required to judge similarity. Furthermore, for him, we know whether a counterfactual is true or false at the outset. He

writes that we should find the right sort of similarity judgement to yield the correct truth value of the counterfactual.

The role of imagination in Lewis' counterfactual analysis is constrained by two factors. The first is his commitment to keep the transition period vague, and the second is the assumption that we know the truth value of the counterfactual we are considering. Neither of these constraints are directly transferable to historical cases. Historians usually use counterfactuals to ask what would have happened if Alexander had conquered Rome, or the Byzantine Empire had defeated the Ottoman Empire, or to decide which among a number of causes was the most important. Historians do not know the truth value of a counterfactual at the outset. This means that the specifics of how a transition period are filled in are important. The following paragraphs illustrate why this is.

Leaving a transition period vague is problematic in historical counterfactuals. This is because changes in a transition period can affect the outcome of an analysis. Reiss (2009) argues that how we imagine the transition period affects whether we think the counterfactual is true, or not, and says that almost all the historical counterfactuals he has analysed do backtrack. He discusses a counterfactual relating to the Cuban Missile Crisis. In July 1962, Krushchev and Castro agreed to construct missile bases in Cuba, precipitating a crisis that brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. Krushchev was emboldened to pursue this strategy partly by Kennedy's lack of resolve during the US Bay of Pigs invasion and the Berlin Crisis, both in 1961. An interesting counterfactual to consider is: Had Kennedy shown greater resolve prior to the Cuban Missile Crisis, Krushchev would not have sent missiles to Cuba. Citing Lebow & Stein (1996), he says it does not make sense to just consider an alternative world in which Kennedy issued a warning, thereby showing resolve, prior to the missile build-up in Cuba because we need to consider "what conditions in the antecedent's past would have had to be in place in order for the counterfactual antecedent to appear possible or likely" (2009, pg. 717). In other words, we need to consider what conditions would need to have been present in order for Kennedy to have been 'more resolved'.

Backtracking is a problem for counterfactual analysis because once we do it there is considerable flexibility in how we change the past to enable the counterfactual change to be made. Differences in the way we imagine this counterfactual scenario make the consequent either true or false. For example, if Kennedy issued a warning because he received advanced information of Soviet plans we might conclude that Krushchev would not have altered his

plans because he saw this as a one-off, given Kennedy's lack of resolve in 1961.

Alternatively, if we fill in more detail about how knowledge of the plans was obtained we might conclude that the realisation that the US had that level of access to Soviet plans would have led Krushchev to change his strategy. In other words, changes in the way we imagine the transition period lead to changes in the conclusions we draw from the counterfactual analysis.

The main concern with Lewis' approach is that, in historical cases, it is difficult to leave a transition period vague, and once we countenance a transition period there are many ways in which we can imagine it. This is a problem not only because historians have flexibility in how they imagine the transition period, but also because it is difficult to judge which transition period is closer to the real historical record. Lewis' stipulation that the counterfactual world 'differs no more from our actual world than it must' is of little help. Elster (1978) writes that the counterfactual death of Hitler at birth requires a number of other changes. We can imagine the death of Hitler taking place in a number of ways, each of which will require some rewriting of the past. Elster writes, "it may be very difficult to tell which of these ways implies the minimum of change" (1978, pg. 187). In the Kennedy example, we can imagine Kennedy showing 'more resolve' in a number of ways, and as result of a number of different transition periods. Is the counterfactual world in which Kennedy shows more resolve during the Bay of Pigs invasion closer or further away from the actual world than a counterfactual world in which Kennedy shows greater resolve during the Berlin crisis? Furthermore, there are many ways in which to show 'resolve'; which of these are closest to a world in which Kennedy shows insufficient resolve? There seems little principled way to decide.

### **Historians and Constraints on the transition period**

Historians do not leave the transition period vague and provide criteria intended to restrict imagination in the transition period. I review these in the following section before concluding that these constraints do not limit imagination to the extent that their proponents hope.

Early examples of counterfactual history were sometimes motivated by political ends, rather than a desire to illustrate the events between history decided. Evans (2014) describes

how, in 1907, Trevelyan pondered what would have happened “If Napoleon had won the battle of Waterloo.” Trevelyan sought to show how badly things would have gone, had Napoleon won. By implication, demonstrating how Waterloo set the stage for the ascendancy of liberalism (of which Trevelyan approved). Evans writes, “Sporadic articles, usually by specialist historians speculating in their own field of research, can be found in various journals and periodicals during the 1960s and 1970s without ever inaugurating a fashion.” (2014, pg. 13). Things began to change in the late 1970s when a number of authors began to think more systematically about counterfactuals.

Elster suggested that historians should not consider any counterfactual, and required that a counterfactual antecedent “must be capable of insertion into the real past” (1978, pg. 184). For example, he says that in order to consider an American economy without slavery in 1860 we cannot simply convert all slave owners into capitalist equivalents and leave everything else unchanged. This is because we know that such an economy would not have come into being without significant other changes in the pre-1860 period. However, if we countenance those, then we are no longer dealing with American slavery (1978, pg. 192). Elster does not use the phrase ‘transition period’, but this is what he is talking about—the changes that we would need to make prior to the counterfactual state of the world. In this case, the changes that would be required in order to make our counterfactual change make the counterfactual assertion impossible to assess. We will make so many changes in the transition period that, at the point of the counterfactual change, we will no longer be dealing with the America we know.

One of the examples he discusses at length is Fogel’s analysis of whether it would have made any difference to American GNP in 1890 if railroads had not been invented. Fogel backtracks to 1830, which was the point in time where “one could legitimately assume a branching point without railroads” (1978, pg. 204). Elster says that Fogel’s approach is close to what Lewis would recommend—Fogel takes the actual 1890 economy, subtracts railways, assumes a minimum number of other changes, and recalculates GNP. In doing so, Fogel assumes that no ‘substitute’ or ‘railway equivalent’ would have been invented. Fogel limits the extent to which imagination is required; it appears to be a primarily economic calculation. Elster questions the legitimacy of this move though. He writes, “we do not want to know what would have happened if, say, it suddenly turned out that structural fatigue in the rails made this mode of transport too dangerous for continued use, all other things remaining the same. We want to know which of the features of the 1890 economy would still have been



around had there never been any railroads in the first place” (1978, pg. 207). Elster believes that Fogel’s methodology means that he is analysing a state of the world that could never have arisen because, in the absence of railroads, America would have developed in different ways—in the absence of railways it is unlikely that a ‘minimum’ number of other changes would have occurred. Elster summarises his worries with Lewis’ approach as follows, “on Lewis’s theory the closest possible world satisfying a certain condition may very well turn out to be a world that could never have branched off from the actual past” (1978, pg. 220).

Evans (1991) echoes Elster by arguing that historians should not imagine counterfactual worlds that make the present a different place, or lead to worlds that could never have branched off from the actual past. Evans provides two criteria for alternative histories. Firstly, they should not “require us to unwind the past”. Later, he says that they should not be “fantastic” (1991, pg. 158). Secondly, “the departure from the actual present should not require us to alter so much else in the present itself as to make it a different place.” (1991, pg. 165). One of the counterfactuals he considered is whether public authorities might have done more to contain the plague. He says that, in principle they may have been able to do so, but that would have required them to alter “too many” of their established priorities, and to have assumed powers which they could not assume (1991, pg. 165).

Tetlock and Belkin’s (1996) focus was not only on the use of counterfactuals in historical analysis, but also in world politics, and the social sciences more generally. They listed six criteria they believed encourage more rigorous thinking about counterfactuals. These are:

- 1 Clarity: the hypothesised antecedent and consequent must be clearly specified and unambiguous.
- 2 Logical Consistency: hypothetical events linking the antecedent and the consequent should be specified, and be consistent with each other and with the antecedent.
- 3 Minimal Rewrite Rule: antecedents should require altering as few ‘well-established’ or agreed upon historical facts as possible.

- 4 Theoretical consistency: connecting principles should be consistent with ‘well-established’ theoretical generalisations that are relevant to the hypothesised antecedent-consequent link.
- 5 Statistical Consistency: connecting principles should be consistent with ‘well-established’ statistical generalisations relevant to the antecedent-consequent link.
- 6 Projectability: testable implications of the connecting principles should be used to test whether the hypotheses are consistent with additional real-world observations. (Tetlock & Belkin, 1996, pg. 18).

The main criterion of interest here is the ‘minimal re-write rule’ because it addresses how historians should think about the transition period. It stipulates that antecedent conditions should alter as few ‘well established’ facts as possible. They write that constraints imposed by the minimal rewrite rule “constrain counterfactual speculation” (1996, pg. 23). Referencing Hawthorne (1991) and Weber (1949), they write that to minimally re-write, historians should start with the real world as it actually was, not unwind the past and rewrite long stretches of history, and not change what we know about real people’s beliefs, goals, or other things we know about them.

In this section I have described the ways in which historians have tried to constrain imagination in the transition period. These stipulate that historians should alter, and unwind, as little as possible of the real past. The counterfactual present should also not be too different a place from the actual present. The difficulty is with judging when these criteria are satisfied. Evans worries that “too many” of people’s priorities would have to have been altered to contain the plague, but judging ‘too many’ is a subjective matter. Deciding how many well-established facts it is permissible to alter is similarly fraught with difficulty. Lebow (2000) makes a similar point, arguing that stipulations like this “suppose that we know what ‘minimal’ really means” (2000, pg. 578).

Tetlock and Belkin write that as few agreed upon facts should be altered. Deciding on what facts there are relies on evidence. Tucker (2009) argues that evidence constrains the counterfactuals historians can legitimately consider. Evidence will be discussed below. But firstly, I want to consider an ideal case, where the transition period has been limited almost

entirely, and show that even in this case, imagination is still not limited in the way many historians have demanded.

### **Counterfactuals restricted to critical actors**

Some historians have focused on more limited counterfactuals—ones which involve changing only one key decision made by an historical figure. In 1979 Snowman published a collection of essays called “If I had been... Ten historical fantasies”. The contributions were written by professional historians, who were asked to “evoke a strictly authentic historical setting...All that is changed is that the central character of each piece is deemed to have decided upon a slightly different, but entirely plausible course of action from that actually adopted.” (Quoted in Evans, pg. 18). Snowman’s stipulations constrain the counterfactuals that historians can consider; the scenarios remain as close as possible to the real historical past—the only change is that a decision is altered. Evans describes how, in considering how people could have acted differently, the historians imagined scenarios in which they made better decisions than they actually did. For example, Kerensky becomes more decisive than he actually was and prevents the Bolsheviks coming to power. Snowman’s stipulation appears to almost eliminate the transition period entirely because the only backtracking required is slightly before the time at which the decision is made; the decision is then made differently.

A similar move has been made by philosophers. For instance, Woodward’s (2003) analysis of counterfactuals also eliminates the transition period: “...once transition periods are countenanced at all, there may be a large number of possible transitions, none obviously closer to the actual world than any other.” (2003, pg. 144). In other words, for Woodward, it is unclear how we are to judge which transition period is closer to the actual world. Partly to avoid this problem, he proposes the idea of an intervention. An intervention breaks the causal chains leading up to the point at which an intervention is made; another way of understanding this is that we change the value of a variable in an exogenous way. This forms part of his view of explanation. Very briefly, if we discover a factor which, when intervened on, leads to changes in the outcome being explained, then we have the beginnings of an explanation. For Woodward, successful explanations are associated with counterfactual experiments that demonstrate how the intervention on a factor affects the outcome being explained (2003, pg. 10-11). In Snowman’s examples, we intervene at the point at which a critical decision was

made, and change this decision (we change the value of the variable). This exogenous intervention means that we need no transition period, we simply switch the decision. After intervening on this decision we replay history and assess the changes in the outcome in which we are interested. This analysis results in conclusions like, 'Had Kerensky been more decisive, he could have prevented the Bolsheviks coming to power'. Kerensky's lack of decisiveness is therefore an explanation of the Bolshevik ascendancy.

Woodward briefly discusses historical counterfactuals, and considers legitimate only those which can be conceived of as hypothetical interventions. He rejects the counterfactual 'If Julius Caesar had been in charge of UN forces during the Korean war, then he would have used nuclear weapons' because we have no clear idea how to intervene in this case, and what the hypothetical experiment would look like (2003, pg. 122). Woodward does not explain this further, but we can interpret this as a concern about the extent of the changes required to make this counterfactual possible. In other words, we would need to backtrack and rewrite history extensively, or we would need to invent time travel. The Kerensky and Kennedy examples also do not meet this criterion, as it is difficult to conceive of an increase in decisiveness, or resolve, as a switch in the value of a variable. By contrast, when a key decision is changed counterfactually, the intervention is minimal, and clear.

Weber (1905/1945) is one of the earliest defenders of counterfactual analysis in historical cases, and appears to use a methodology that is close to Woodward's. He argues that real historical events decide between a number of possibilities. For example, the outcome of a battle may have decided between two (or more) possible outcomes, or possibilities. He asks "What, then, is meant when we speak of a number of 'possibilities' between which those contests are said to have 'decided'? It involves first the production of... 'imaginative constructs' by the disregarding of one or more of those elements of 'reality' which are actually present, and by the mental construction of a course of events..." (1945, pg. 173). For Weber, the consequences of a counterfactual change are assessed using our knowledge of laws, or 'general empirical rules'. For him, the counterfactual changes historians make to the historical record are simply made. A battle is decided one way rather than another, or an historical figure makes a different decision to the one they actually made. This seems very much like Woodward's idea of an intervention.

Imagination may be required to judge which alternative decisions or possibilities are reasonable, but once we have decided on this, we can replay history and see what would have happened. However, counterfactually altering a decision involves more imagination than at first appears. Hawthorne (1991) writes that what is permissible when dealing with the decisions of actors, as Snowman does, is difficult to judge. This is because, at some point, historians will be making such extensive changes to the character of actors that they would “cease to recognise or to acknowledge themselves as the agents that they were.” (1991, pg. 166). We can imagine scenarios in which Kerensky is more decisive, but it is debatable whether a more decisive Kerensky is still Kerensky, the historical figure. It is easy to create a purely imagined ‘Kerensky’ who might have acted in entirely different ways to the actual Kerensky. This, for Hawthorn, is a step too far. In attempting to limit the transition period to decisions that real historical actors could have made differently Snowman appears to have limited the role imagination plays in the transition period. However, as Hawthorne notes, such changes may rely on extensive reimagination of these characters.

Bulhof (1999) also aims to put counterfactual history on a scientific footing, but raises the same issue as Hawthorne. Bulhof argues that counterfactual claims in history can be modelled after the sciences, if we think of the person whose choices we are considering as subject to the same deterministic laws as the system in which they are embedded. In an example which is similar to Woodward’s analysis, he says that if we change the decision of a general to fight a battle earlier than he did this is “not dissimilar to the alterations physicists make when they perform an experiment.” (1999, pg. 167). However, he qualifies this by noting that the general is only free to alter his decision when we view him from our perspective, outside the system. In contrast, the general “as part of the system being studied is not free to alter his choices.” The “psychological laws of behaviour and ways in which he was brought up determined his course of action.” (1999, pg. 167) Bulhof does not discuss transition periods explicitly, but his phrasing suggests why they are important even when seemingly small changes are made. A counterfactual change at the point at which the general decides when to fight the battle may not be possible because of prior causes which determined his choice. Implicit in this is the possibility that in order to make this change possible, prior events need to be changed. According to Bulhof, we can think of historical counterfactuals in the same way as scientific ones. However, sometimes counterfactual changes are not possible to make because of complicated initial conditions.

Ferguson attempts to impose even stricter constraints on how counterfactual analysis is performed, which appear to overcome Hawthorne and Bulhoff's worries. He begins with criticisms of previous examples of counterfactual analysis. He writes that, up to the point at which he was writing, there were two types of counterfactual analysis. Those which were largely works of imagination but which lack evidential support, and those which were designed to test hypotheses by empirical means; these, he writes "eschew imagination in favour of computation" (1997, pg. 18). The first he rejects because of historians' reliance on hindsight and implausibility. Ferguson writes that the second type, epitomised by Fogel's counterfactual in which America built no railroads, makes assumptions that are often anachronistic. He writes that contemporary debates were about where to build railways, rather than whether to build them.

Ferguson attempts to remedy this by proposing that counterfactuals in history should focus on alternative courses of events that were considered by actors at the time. He says, "We should consider as plausible or probable *only those alternatives which we can show on the basis of contemporary evidence that contemporaries actually considered*" (1997, pg. 86. Italics in original). Later, he supplements this with the requirement that "we can only legitimately consider those hypothetical scenarios which contemporaries not only considered but also committed to paper, (or some other form of record)..." (1997, pg. 87). This imposes additional constraints on historians because they can only consider alternative courses of action which contemporary actors actually considered, rather than alternative courses of action that, with the benefit of hindsight, we can think of them taking. This prevents the creation of 'imagined Kerenskies', because an historian will only consider alternative courses of action that the real Kerensky considered. In theory, this should avoid the need for a transition period because the historical actors were, as far as we can tell, trying to decide between a number of options before them. The only change to the historical record is that an historical actor picks an alternative course of action from a number of courses of action which they were considering. In contrast to Snowman, we need imagine no dramatic changes in character, which Hawthorn sees as excessive. This seems very much like an intervention—with evidence that a decision could have been made differently, we intervene to put history on a different path. Tetlock and Belkin, echoing Ferguson, say that counterfactual scenarios can be constrained by considering only policy options which historical actors ideally almost chose (1996, pg. 23).

Counterfactuals of this sort appear to limit imagination by ridding us of the need for a transition period of any significance, and by restricting interventions to courses of action that historical figures were considering. The intervention in this case is limited to switching a decision to another option under consideration. There is no need to imagine possible counterfactual decisions, nor to smuggle in changes in historical actors' personalities. However, there are reasons to doubt whether evidence of alternative courses of action really is evidence that this alternative course of action was viable. Tucker argues that "Ferguson constructs decontextualised historical agents, isolated from larger cultural and economic contexts that precluded the kind of decision-making he would have undertaken." (1999, pg. 276). Here again, is the worry that to make the counterfactual work, individual decision makers have to be presented, implausibly, as free-floating agents. Just because the historical actor was considering a variety of options does not mean that they were equally able to choose all of these options. Tucker points to social and economic factors. Lebow and Stein (1996) raise the concern that sometimes policy makers write official memos merely to "put a position on the official record" (1996, pg. 123). A record of an alternative course of action does not necessarily demonstrate that that a counterfactual decision was a viable option, and even if it was, other factors, such as the ones Tucker highlights, may have made the selection of that option remote.

In this section I reviewed proposals to restrict counterfactual analysis to decisions that historical actors could have made differently. These counterfactuals bear a resemblance to Woodward's notion of an intervention, in which we intervene in the historical record and assess how history would have played out. This seemingly limits the transition period almost entirely, especially if we adopt Ferguson's criteria that counterfactual changes are limited to options that historical actors committed to record. However, just because someone was considering an alternative course of action does not mean that they were able to take this course. Kennedy might have recorded an intention to be more resolved, but actually showing more resolve could still require an extensive transition period in which changes in his character are made. Furthermore, other structural factors could have limited his freedom to do so. In the following section I assess the proposal that evidence should limit the scope for imagination in transition periods, and argue that evidence does not always give us what we hope for in this regard.

## Evidence

Tucker's proposal is to focus on evidence. He writes, "Instead of speculation, the only way to examine the contingency of history is to study it empirically, and attempt with the help of theoretically based counterfactuals to find out how sensitive particular historical outcomes were to initial conditions." (1999, pg. 273). He argues that the more information at a historian's disposal, the fewer alternative pasts there are, and proposes that counterfactual histories should be tested just like real historical theories. He writes, "The probability of the counterfactual depends then on the likelihood of the rest of the evidence given a counterfactual hypothesis." (2009, pg. 230) He illustrates this with a minimal counterfactual "Had George Bush Sr died in 1990, Vice-President Dan Quayle would have become the 42nd president of the United States" (2009, pg. 230). Let us suppose that George Bush Sr stepped in front of a bus while taking a stroll outside the White House, and died. This counterfactual appears relatively unproblematic because Quayle was Vice President, the rules of the constitution stipulate the Vice President should take over if the President is unable to perform the functions of his job, and there is evidence that the political elites were acting in accordance with the constitution at the time. However, there isn't enough evidence to say with any degree of confidence, how a Quayle administration would have dealt with the collapse of Communism, or the Iraqi occupation. For Tucker, imagination steps in only when evidence is scarce. Tucker's minimal counterfactual works in a similar way to Woodward's interventions in that a counterfactual change is made, and then the counterfactual history plays out in accordance, not with scientific laws, but in accordance with the rules of the constitution. Importantly though, this counterfactual isn't informative because it just serves to illustrate the rules of the US constitution.

It isn't clear that evidence always works this way. Lebow and Stein (1996) analyse a variety of counterfactuals relating to President Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis. While they note that a number of counterfactuals are implausible because they make selective use of evidence, they also note that evidence doesn't always help historians to distinguish between counterfactuals. They point to the years and decades after WW1 in which many statesmen published memoirs, and governments released a large quantity of documents. They write that this evidence "fanned rather than resolved controversy and ignited new debates about what might have been if one or another of the principals had acted otherwise" (1996, pg. 121). They also note that policy makers often write memos that are intended to persuade, and do



not cite relevant evidence (1996, pg. 123). In other words, although evidence may help to limit the imagination that historians can use when filling in a transition period it does not necessarily do so, and sometimes has the opposite effect.

Lebow (2000) also notes that the boundary between imaginary, and real history, is difficult to judge. He describes a research project in which he and Janice Gross Stein researched Cold War crises. Despite conducting extensive interviews and accumulating a lot of documents they still had “no hard evidence about the motives for some of the key decisions made by Kennedy and Krushchev. We suspect that Krushchev was never clear in his own mind about the relative importance of the several goals...” (2000, pg. 554). This suggests that historical narratives that give reasons for action often involve some imagination because even in the best cases, evidence is often insufficient to underwrite reasons for specific decisions.

Lebow (2000) also raises an ontological worry about ‘facts’, noting that facts are social constructions. In a concrete example, he describes an experiment in which a group of foreign policy experts were asked to assess the contingency of the outcome of the Cuban missile crisis. The experimenters used ‘factual’ and ‘counterfactual’ framing: At what point did some form of peaceful resolution of the crisis become inevitable? And at what point did all alternative, more violent outcomes become impossible? Lebow writes that “Even though these two measures were obtained almost side by side in our questionnaire, the factual versus counterfactual framings of the historical question elicited systematically different responses, not just random variation that could be attributed to fatigue or boredom.” (2000, pg. 557). The experts attributed greater importance to contingency in the counterfactual question. The framing of a question enables experts to respond differently.

So far, I have discussed the effort to legitimize counterfactual analysis in history by constraining the role of imagination in transition periods. These proposals have proven unsatisfactory. In response, we might conclude that counterfactuals are not epistemologically legitimate in history. However, we must acknowledge that historians do in fact present counterfactual analysis, and I want to allow that at least some of these are successful. The following section presents a way out of this position. If we reconceive the purpose of counterfactual analysis, we can see it as an epistemologically successful practice, even with relatively unconstrained imagination. The key is to appreciate that in certain cases, what is required from a counterfactual is not knowledge about what would have happened if some

counterfactual conditions obtained, but simply, knowledge that things might have been otherwise. As Lebow writes, “We should worry less about the uncertainty of counterfactual experimentation and think more about its mind-opening implications.” (2000, pg. 581)

### **Rehabilitating imagination**

Steven Weber (1996) notes that it is difficult to understand what ‘minimal’ means, in the context of a minimal rewrite rule. He notes that Tetlock and Belkin have made a “valiant effort to constrain counterfactual statements about the past,” (1996, pg. 278) but, “The search for inappropriate constraints tends to drive out imagination and thoughtfulness about what could have been” (1996, pg. 278). Weber, rather than trying to limit imagination, tries to rehabilitate it. In his view, the purpose of counterfactual analysis is not to test, or make, causal claims, its purpose is to generate theories, arguments and ideas. They “raise questions and open up new ways of thinking when applied to the past” (1996, pg. 268). Tetlock and Parker (2006) argue that “Giving freer rein to our imaginations can stop the real world from occluding our vision of possible worlds that may have ‘almost’ come into being at various junctures” (2006, pg. 28). The desire to highlight the contingency of history is also one of Ferguson’s primary defences of counterfactuals. If we can imagine how the present could have been otherwise, this stops us seeing events as inevitable. Tetlock and Parker argue that an appreciation of contingency is particularly important in conflict resolution. Using the example of the Northern Irish ‘troubles’, they argue that four episodes in the 1960s and 1970s are usually seen as critical turning points. They write “In a rare show of unanimity, both Protestants and Catholics normally regard each of these episodes and ‘inevitable’ steps on the path to continuing sectarian violence.” (2006, pg. 26-27). Tetlock and Parker note that these episodes were opposed by important actors at the time; and argue that these episodes were not inevitable. Appreciating that the past could have been different “should certainly promote an awareness that current and future political choices can (and must) be made from a wide universe of possibilities and not from an overdetermined past that permits only one inevitably divisive response.” (Tetlock and Parker, 2006, pg. 27) Imagining alternative pasts may allow people in the present to consider a wider range of responses to our current crises. Importantly, this does not mean that we need a clear answer to what would have happened in a counterfactual history; the mere possibility of it being otherwise is sufficient to highlight that a wide range of possibilities lie ahead, and that by itself can be significant.

Khong uses counterfactuals in a similar way. He discusses the counterfactual: ‘If Britain had confronted Hitler with the threat of war over Czechoslovakia, Hitler would have backed down.’ This is coupled with the further consequent that ‘World War II might not have happened’ (1996, pg. 95). Britain’s Prime Minister, Chamberlain, was hesitant to risk war with Germany in 1938. According to Khong, he had three reasons for this; firstly, the memory of World War I was still fresh, secondly, Britain was militarily unprepared for war in 1938, and thirdly, Chamberlain had a strong belief in his own ability to find a diplomatic solution to Hitler’s expansionism. Khong notes that Churchill advocated a much stronger response to Germany, a view that was shared by other politicians, e.g. Eden and Cooper. He concludes that it was very possible for Britain not to have appeased Hitler at Munich (1996, pg. 99-105).

This counterfactual is therefore one that can reasonably be asked, because Britain might not have appeased Hitler in 1938. The counterfactual about British appeasement is not just an interesting academic exercise; the belief that this counterfactual is true, that Hitler would have backed down if he had been confronted, influenced US foreign policy post World War II. Khong writes that “A recurrent theme on post-World War II American foreign policy is the necessity of avoiding another Munich”. Examples include debates over US policy towards Korea, Vietnam and Bosnia. Khong writes:

“From Harry Truman’s equating inaction over North Korea’s invasion of South Korea to a mistake of Munichlike proportions, to Lyndon Johnson’s portraying the Vietnam War as a war to prevent future Munichs, to recent US mutterings about the need to distance itself from the Munichlike policies of Britain and France towards Bosnia, the Munich analogy has served as a major script of the likely course of events if the United States failed to do X.” (1996, pg. 96)

Asking whether Hitler would have backed down, and whether World War II would not have happened, is a question that makes sense to ask because the antecedent could plausibly have happened. Moreover, deciding whether this counterfactual is true or false has important consequences for the political landscape post-World War II. The belief that appeasement would have led Hitler to back down, and possibly avoided World War II has influenced US foreign policy, and may do so again in the future. In this case, analysing this counterfactual is useful, despite our inability to decide what would have happened. Khong

outlines three counterfactual scenarios following an imagined confrontation with Hitler at Munich:

- i. Hitler would have started a war in 1938.
- ii. Hitler would have started a war in 1938, but Hitler's enemies within Germany, specifically those in the military, would have deposed him.
- iii. Hitler would have backed down.

Khong concludes that it is unclear which of these scenarios would have occurred (1996, pg. 116). Nevertheless, although we cannot pick between these scenarios, they are important because, he argues, acknowledging the existence of more than one scenario is sufficient to throw some doubt on the uncritical assessment of this counterfactual by post war political actors. He writes, "This claim raises serious questions for those—scholars and policy makers—wont to advocate standing firm as a general rule of diplomacy because history "teaches" that a more resolute England in the 1930s would have "certainly" caused Hitler to back down." (1996, pg. 116). It seems therefore, that even when it is impossible to judge whether a counterfactual claim is true or false, giving reasons for thinking it true or false may be useful in and of itself, if only to reduce confidence in the truth of any particular counterfactual scenario.

To summarise, Khong suggests that there are three possible counterfactual scenarios following a counterfactually more confrontational Chamberlain. He also gives reasons for thinking that the plausibility of these different scenarios has implications for US foreign policy, because US foreign policy has often relied on a simplistic understanding of this counterfactual. It is sufficient to know that a number of different things might have happened, not all of which support more aggressive foreign policy in this, or other, situations. Counterfactual analysis may therefore be a useful exercise. In this particular case, the ability to imagine a number of possible counterfactual scenarios is a virtue, because it throws doubt on a simplistic analysis of this counterfactual.

While such an approach to counterfactual analysis appears to be at odds with the discussion in the prior section of this paper, it incorporates many of the stipulations discussed above. Khong's analysis is powerful largely because it uses evidence, for example about the views of Eden and Cooper, and the three scenarios aren't 'fantastical'. However, the evidence is insufficient for us to choose between the three scenarios. In one sense the transition period

is left vague, along the lines Lewis suggests, but not entirely so. Khong sketches three scenarios that plausibly fill in the transition period, but does not decide between them, and there may be additional plausible fillings out. The transition period may be filled in in many ways, but all Khong needs is that there are a number of ways of doing so, each of which is supported by evidence. Khong's analysis also demonstrates the contingency of historical events. Despite the difference between Kong and Ferguson's approaches, Ferguson's defence of counterfactual analysis is motivated by a desire to demonstrate the contingency of history. Khong's analysis suggests that this can be achieved without requiring a clear answer to what would have happened, or limiting counterfactual analysis to decisions made by important actors.

### **Conclusion**

I have argued that imagination can play a positive role in counterfactual analysis in historical cases. Transition periods cannot be left entirely vague, as Lewis suggests. However, this does not mean that counterfactuals need be limited to 'minimal changes' or interventions on the decisions of historical actors. By changing the focus of the analysis in the way that Khong does, rather than being driven out, imagination is given a central role. While counterfactual worlds need to be plausible, and supported by evidence, this evidence does not need to be strong enough to give a clear answer to what would have happened in a counterfactual world. Thoughtful consideration of how the world might have been does not depend on knowing the truth value of counterfactuals. Nor do historians need to know 'what would have happened if...' in order to demonstrate the contingency of history.

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