

COUNTERFACTUAL GEOGRAPHIES: WORLDS THAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues for a renewed consideration of counterfactuals within geography. Drawing upon Doreen Massey's emphasis on notions of 'possibility', 'chance', 'undecidability' and 'happenstance', we argue for an engagement with approaches in the humanities that have addressed such issues directly. We review previous uses of counterfactual method in historical geography, particularly as related to cliometrics and the 'new economic history' of the 1960s, but argue that a recent upsurge of interest in other disciplines indicates alternative ways that 'what-if' experiments might work in the sub-discipline. Recent counterfactual work outside of geography has had a notably spatial cast, often thinking through the nature of alternative worlds, or using counterfactual strategies that are explicitly concerned with space as well as temporal causality. We set out possible agendas for counterfactual work in historical geography. These include: consideration of the historical geographies within existing counterfactual writings and analyses; suggestions for distinctive ways that historical geographers might think and write counterfactually, including experiments in geographies of happenstance, and the exploration of more-than-human possibilities; analyses of the geography of and in counterfactual writing; and study of the political, ethical and emotional demands that counterfactuals make. This discussion and framework provides an extended introduction to this special edition of the *Journal of Historical Geography* on counterfactual geographies.

KEY WORDS: counterfactuals; alternative histories; alternative worlds; speculative fiction; Doreen Massey; history and philosophy of geography.

RUNNING TITLE: Counterfactual geographies

## RUMINATION ON HEMISPHERES COLLIDING

The armies were approaching the city from the quarter named the reed or crocodile – the direction in which the sun rises. Much was known about them already. Tales had come back from outlying provinces. Tax gatherers from the city, collecting tribute from conquered territories, had met up with them. Envoys had been despatched, to engage in talks, to find out more. And now neighbouring groups, chafing against their long subordination to the Aztec city, had thrown their lot with the strange invaders. Through these prior contacts, the constant flow of messages, rumours, interpretations reaching the city, much was known of the approaching army. Although the strangers' bodies were completely covered, were 'white, as if made of lime' and had 'yellow hair' (although some had black), their ways of warfare seemed familiar. Like the Aztecs, they rode and fought on horseback. The strangers were approaching Tenochtitlán, the biggest city in the world. Its empire now stretched far, through conquest and continual violent subordination. Thus far the Aztecs had conquered all before them and these strangers were not the first to challenge their authority. And as before, Moctezuma's mounted warriors would be victorious and drive the invaders into the sea. This would be yet another glorious moment for the Empire.<sup>1</sup>

So Doreen Massey *might* have written at the beginning of *For space*. Massey views the encounter between the Aztecs and the Spanish as the 'meeting-up of two stories, each already with its own spaces and geographies, two imperial histories'.<sup>2</sup> Our

opening imagines a slightly different meeting-up. In his *Guns, germs and steel*, Jared Diamond treats the Spanish-Aztec encounter in not dissimilar terms, as an instance of ‘hemispheres colliding’, when ‘Native American’ and ‘Eurasian’ societies came violently together. In ruminating on this encounter, Massey’s aim is to encourage us to rethink space ‘as the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist’, rather than a static surface across which some (the Spanish) move whilst others (the Aztecs) remain immobile.<sup>3</sup> For Diamond it offers different insights, specifically about why Europeans were about to reach and conquer the lands of ‘Native Americans’ and not vice versa. To account for this, he identifies differences between the societies in 1492 CE. One of the most glaring, Diamond contends, was the relative absence of large domesticated mammal species in the Americas, ‘due largely to the Late Pleistocene extinction (extermination?) of most of North and South America’s former big wild mammal species’. Such species provided Eurasian societies with protein, power and transport.<sup>4</sup> To emphasise the difference this made in the collision of hemispheres, Diamond undertakes a counterfactual thought experiment:

If it had not been for those extinctions, modern history might have taken a different course. When Cortés and his bedraggled adventurers landed on the Mexican coast in 1519, they might have been driven into the sea by thousands of Aztec cavalry mounted on domesticated Native American horses. Instead of the Aztecs dying of smallpox, the Spaniards might have been wiped out by American germs transmitted by disease-resistant Aztecs. American civilizations resting on animal power might have been sending their own conquistadores to ravage Europe. But those

hypothetical outcomes were foreclosed by mammal extinctions thousands of years earlier.<sup>5</sup>

Diamond's counterfactual takes us back to what Massey could have written in a world that might have been. Despite clear theoretical and political differences between their work,<sup>6</sup> it is appropriate that we start this special edition with an alternative to the opening rumination of *For Space* on the multiplicity of trajectories that converged at the place and time when Hernán Cortés and his small Spanish army arrived at Tenochtitlán. Indeed, such a rewriting is even invited by Massey's proposition that space should be understood 'as the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality'; her emphasis on notions of 'possibility', 'chance', 'undecidability' and 'happenstance';<sup>7</sup> and her insistence on rethinking assumptions about the fixity of the physical and natural worlds.<sup>8</sup> In this light, we follow Diamond in imagining a different collision with both the Spanish and the far more numerous Aztecs having domesticated horses at their disposal. The result of this meeting-up would surely have been different. Diamond does not explain exactly how this conjectural Aztec imperial history, with its equine spaces and horse geographies, might have come about, but his overall argument turns on the orientation of continental axes. He argues that the east-west orientation of Eurasia's axis facilitated the diffusion of domesticated plant and animal species, whereas the north-south orientation of the Americas did not.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps if the tectonic plates had drifted differently and the Americas had been orientated more east-west, then the continent's more widely distributed large mammal species would not have become extinct and Moctezuma would have had his cavalry.

This is counterfactual experiment on a grand scale and deliberately provocative. We certainly claim no expertise in the unpredictability of plate tectonic movement, nor can we plausibly insist that an alternative Moctezuma would have ridden out to slaughter a different Cortés in this alternative world. And yet the thought-experiment does change the way we think about this meeting-up, making active the very fundamentals of physical geography and biogeography that are the most static and taken-for-granted contexts for most analyses of such events. It develops Massey's reading of 'migrant rocks' in *For space*; it was not simply that the movements of tectonic plates created 'an Atlantic for Hernán Cortés to cross', but that the specific movements of rocks conditioned and constrained future human actions.<sup>10</sup> None of the papers that follow are quite so dramatic in their use of counterfactual thinking, but all explore its potential for opening new ways of thinking and new ways of writing in historical geography. As well as introducing those papers, this extended opening article develops Massey's ideas about space and chanciness, and analyses their relationship with counterfactual thought. We review earlier engagements with counterfactuals in geography, and discuss important examples of work in other disciplines that has direct relevance for historical geography. We also make suggestions about a range of different uses and responses to counterfactual work in historical geography.

### THE CHANCE OF SPACE

In *For Space*, Massey turns to a number of inspirations in thinking about what she describes as the 'chance of space', how 'in spatial configurations, otherwise unconnected narratives may be brought into contact, or previously unconnected ones

be wrenched apart'.<sup>11</sup> She draws upon two approaches to chance that she argues are directly relevant to geographical understanding: firstly the postmodernist perspectives of Lyotard and Derrida, particularly as explicitly spatialised and materialised in the work of the architect, Bernard Tshumi; and secondly, in the ways that a scientific literature on chaos theory, complexity and uncertainty has been used to 'licence a celebration of undecidability in social matters'.<sup>12</sup> While sympathetic to Massey's broader claims about the connections between possibility and geography, we argue here that an alternative approach, one embedded in the perspectives of the humanities, has significant potential for geographical understanding. While controversial, counterfactualism is an approach to provisionality and transitoriness that has the potential to provoke discussion of specific cause and effect relations and contingencies in ways that are unamenable to the generalised ontological claims for uncertainty made by much post-structural thought.

Counterfactualism also shares some characteristics with complexity theory, particularly as based upon computer simulation models.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, in a typology of forms of counterfactual experiment, the political scientists Philip Tetlock and Aaron Belkin, explicitly recognise the 'epistemological kinship' of these approaches.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, there is a strong tendency towards reductionism where complexity is applied to the social world, particularly in the search for emergent properties. Such approaches, even those that adopt sophisticated 'multi-agent social simulation' (where there is differentiation between the modelled characteristics applied to individuals or groups) risk reducing human beings to reactive objects, devoid of agency, emotions, intent and reflection.<sup>15</sup> By contrast, in many of the most common forms of counterfactual experiment, it is precisely the chancy nature of such characteristics that

are at the crux of speculation, with actions and decisions then placed within a longer narrative of consequence and response that draws necessarily upon interpretative as well as explanatory knowledge of human behaviour and social organization.<sup>16</sup>

Counterfactuals have hardly made an appearance in the history of historical geography. The one sustained argument for their use by William Norton, particularly in his *Historical Analysis in Geography*, came as a late echo of spatial science. Norton argued that a key approach for historical geography involved ‘explicit cause-and-effect analyses relating process and form and possibly incorporating simulations and counterfactuals’.<sup>17</sup> Norton’s inspiration and model was the so-called ‘new economic history’ of the late 1950s and 1960s, particularly Robert Fogel’s pioneering work on the significance of railway technology for American economic growth, and his later controversial assessment of the economic effects of slavery.<sup>18</sup> The new economic history was based upon quantitative modelling of economies, usually using neo-classical price theory, ‘tested’ against reality through a series of simulated runs. Once the models were calibrated, they could be used to judge the significance of particular factors in counterfactual experiments. So in Fogel’s work the significance of the development of the railways is tested by running a pre-calibrated simulation model of the American economy with the counterfactual assumption that the railways did not exist.

For Norton, the counterfactual technique was ‘perhaps the most original and distinctive component of the new economic history’ and an approach that demanded more attention by historical geographers. Interestingly the examples that he provides follow less the form of tightly defined econometric models, than looser thought



experiments, for example, about the consequences for Canadian history of an early discovery of the Hudson river by Champlain on any of his voyages south from Port Royal in 1604, 1605 and 1606 (Norton sketches a long narrative of consequence leading to a potentially ‘indestructible’ French North American empire.) These kinds of speculations, which have more in common with recent work by political scientists on the geopolitical consequences of plausible changes in exploration and military campaigns, were buried in a book whose main message was seen as a defence of heavily-criticised positivistic epistemologies.<sup>19</sup> By 1984 the tide had long since turned against such approaches in the sub-discipline, and disappointingly counterfactuals, if considered at all by geographers, were seen as part and parcel of econometric analysis. A short entry by Derek Gregory in early editions of the *Dictionary of Human Geography* explicitly connected counterfactual methods to econometric history and formal model building, but suggested, quoting Postan, that ‘the might-have-beens of history are not a profitable subject for discussion.’<sup>20</sup>

If counterfactual methods and experiments have been pretty marginal in debates over methods and epistemologies for historical geography, they have a long and controversial status in the discipline of history. For some historians, perhaps the majority, counterfactualism catches in the craw. It is almost obligatory in discussing counterfactual approaches to reference E. P. Thompson’s castigation of counterfactual history as ‘Geschichtswissenschaftlopff’ (unhistorical shit), or E. H. Carr’s rather more polite dismissal of ‘parlour-games’ in *What is History?*<sup>21</sup> The ferocity of the sceptical reaction is striking; others have described the approach as a dead end or a ‘methodological rathole’.<sup>22</sup>

Such criticisms come from a wide range of positions. For Carr, this came from a commitment to history as the factual record of the past, an epistemology most fully expressed in the work of Michael Oakeshott who claimed that the question ‘is never what must, or what might have taken place, but solely what the evidence obliges us to conclude did take place’.<sup>23</sup> On the part of many historians there is an almost visceral hatred of work that plays with the past, castigated as alchemical pretend-histories and ‘unabashed wastes of time by historians who ought to know better.’<sup>24</sup> In historians committed to a strong idea of the truth of the past, the shift from evidence to speculation, and a concentration on overtly fictional counterfactual scenarios is a denial of history, not an extension to its methods. Other critics point to the impossibility of verification of counterfactual speculation; in a sense the only thing we can be certain of is that, by definition, they did not take place. Even those more sympathetic to counterfactualism worry about the difficulties of establishing clear rules to distinguish between plausible alternatives and wild flights of fantasy. A radically different denial of experiments in the possible past follows the tradition of philosophical holism in Leibniz, and then the teleological historicisms of Hegel and Marx. Here the objection to histories of what might have been and of possible worlds concerns not the facticity of the past, but its necessity. For such ontologies there is a necessary relation of events and specific spatial configurations to an essential social whole or determined path of historical change.<sup>25</sup>

It is fair to suggest that most contemporary practicing historical geographers hold epistemological positions that are rather different from these. This in and of itself is not a justification for advocating counterfactual experiment as a new methodology for

historical geographers, but it does suggest that there might be scope at the very least for an exploration of its possibilities. This sense is strengthened by three relatively recent developments.

First, there have been a number of sustained arguments advocating forms of counterfactual method. At the most fundamental (as discussed in this special edition by Mark Day) this is an argument that all forms of causal explanation of what happened necessarily involve consideration of what did not happen and what might have happened. Any claims that event or factor  $x$  made a critical causal contribution to the outcome  $y$ , necessarily imply an imagined situation where  $y$  did not occur because  $x$  was absent. This ubiquitous but usually unacknowledged ‘what-if’ reasoning is implied by many of the words that are used to construct our analyses and narratives; words and phrases like ‘influenced’, ‘shaped’, ‘impacted upon’, ‘facilitated’, ‘brought about’, ‘precipitated’ all allude to causality, and all imply that things could have been different.<sup>26</sup> Although most contemporary historical geographers are reticent to frame their narratives and analyses as explicit exercises in cause-and-effect, this is both a powerful reminder of the ubiquity of causal claims in our work, and a reminder of the way that even the most prosaic and mild assertions in our work are haunted by the possibilities of what might have been.

Beyond this general claim of the inevitability of counterfactuals are more focused calls for specific forms of counterfactual method. Perhaps the best-known of these is Niall Ferguson’s introductory essay to the edited collection *Virtual History*.<sup>27</sup> Ferguson’s discussion focuses on a common form of counterfactual thought, the switching of key events or a change in a decision: what would have followed if Home

Rule for Ireland had been enacted in 1912, if Germany had invaded southern England in 1940, if Kennedy had not been shot. His fundamental aim is to use counterfactual experiment to demonstrate the indeterminacy of history and the intrinsic failings of historical sociology and deterministic theories of history, particularly Marxism.<sup>28</sup> Yet there is no logical reason why such what-if scenarios should necessarily indicate either the radical unpredictability of history, or the primacy of the decisions of ‘great men’. Such thought experiments may also be used to explore the robustness of historical formations, or perhaps tellingly to help tease out the relative significance of individual agency, chance and wider structures. The use of counterfactuals as a tool *for* historical social and political science (rather than in a polemic rejection of such approaches) is to be found in Geoffrey Hawthorn’s influential *Plausible Worlds* and in the work of the political scientist Philip Tetlock.<sup>29</sup> Despite their ideological differences, the works of Ferguson, Hawthorn and Tetlock all attempt to move beyond claims about the logical inevitability of counterfactual reasoning, towards formulating rules of engagement for the formulation of counterfactual experiments and narratives, that have implications for their possible use by historical geographers.

Secondly and pertinently for historical geography, one of the features of this renewed academic interest in counterfactual strategies has been a developing sense of explorations of alternative *worlds*.<sup>30</sup> In the classic switching-event form of counterfactual there is a sense of consequences spreading out in a kind of time-space cone from the imagined change – a different world results because the Greeks lost to the Persians at Salamis, because the Chinese Admiral Zheng He was not stopped from continuing his explorations of South Asia and Africa in the early fifteenth century, because Henry VIII of England chose not to break with Rome, or because Stalin died

before the Germans were repulsed from the Soviet Union. In these examples, geography seems secondary, a consequence of a different unfolding of events. However, other forms of counterfactual thinking bring a much more active sense of the interconnections between space and time. An important example is the collection of essays on *Unmaking the West* that has as its central focus not a chain of events, but a fundamental geographical world ordering. While most of the essays in *Unmaking the West* follow a conventional form of counterfactual experiment, usually following the ‘minimal rewrite rule’ (i.e. making suggestions that require only small and immediately plausible changes to the actual historical record, such as a change in the outcome of a battle or a political decision, or the early death of a key agent), their combined and cumulative effect is a form of grand-scale path dependency analysis. This leads to a broad conclusion that prior to about 1500 CE it was relatively easy to ‘throttle the baby in its cradle’ but that ‘by the eighteenth century, in order to derail Western expansion one needs to advance increasingly complex what-if scenarios that tinker with history at multiple junctures and stretch the credulity and patience of even indulgent readers’.<sup>31</sup>

A rather different kind of exploration of alternative worlds is to be found in Hawthorn’s *Plausible Worlds*. Here the relationship between time and space, or between event and geography becomes more complex, demonstrating sensibilities that might be described as those of historical geography as much as of historical sociology. One of Hawthorn’s counterfactual examples focuses on the plague pandemics in early modern Europe, questioning whether they must be regarded as immutable natural forces – to use Braudel’s terms, part of the constraining biological regime in the *longue durée* of early modern Europe. Two features of this analysis

stand out. First, Hawthorn's discussion opens out speculation about historical possibility away from battles and politics, and into the complex and hybrid interactions between microbes, animals, and human society. Although the terminology and mode of argument used is rather different from that of actor network theory, Hawthorn is similarly straining conventional notions of human agency; this is counterfactual work in a more-than-human world. Secondly, the organisation of space is central to Hawthorn's counterfactual thinking. In asking whether the incidence and spread of plague could have been limited earlier, Hawthorn gives priority to population structures and urban forms, to flows of people, goods, rats, fleas and bacilli and control of their movements, and particularly to urban governance. The basic counterfactual argues that although it is implausible to imagine that early modern European thinking could develop a fully detailed aetiology and epidemiology of the plague and hence a 'modern' response to the disease, that nonetheless, it is plausible to posit a world in which authoritarian urban governments were able to effect successful *cordons saintaires* and thus greatly limit the spread of plague. Hawthorn argues that this is plausible because there were specific and limited contemporary examples of such policies in action. Hawthorn's counterfactual imagines not a single, switching event, but what is effectively a plausible alternative urban and political geography, not so very different from that which did exist. Hawthorn's argument is that such experiment facilitates a middle course of historical analysis, one that moves beyond a simple dichotomy of determinism or chance, to see why what happened 'turns not only on states of affairs that were beyond human control but also on an assessment of practical reasoning and public powers'.<sup>32</sup>

The final recent impetus towards an engagement with counterfactual thinking by historical geographers is the more general expansion of interest in these issues, in the academy and beyond. There is, to put things bluntly, a lot of it about. This is not to suggest that historical geographers should simply jump on a passing intellectual fashion. However, what is clear is that counterfactual methods and the counterfactual imagination are being drawn upon in contexts that touch upon the concerns and interests of historical geographers. These include the history of science,<sup>33</sup> global history,<sup>34</sup> geopolitics and international relations,<sup>35</sup> as well as renewed debates about agency and structure.<sup>36</sup> A growing fascination for exploring what-if questions and for thinking about alternative worlds is even more apparent in fictional writing, where it goes under such names as ‘alternate history’, ‘alternate universes’, ‘allohistory’, ‘uchronia’ and ‘parahistory’.<sup>37</sup> Recent speculative fiction ranges from the popular writing of Harry Turtledove,<sup>38</sup> to more self-consciously ‘high concept’ novels by William Gibson, Bruce Sterling and Neal Stephenson.<sup>39</sup> This work indicates the popularity of counterfactual writing, but also demonstrates the great range of ways in which what-if questions are asked and answered.

### COUNTERFACTUAL AGENDAS

The papers in this special edition come from an ongoing discussion about the use and potential of counterfactuals for historical geography, particularly in a session at the Royal Geographical Society with Institute of British Geographers conference in London in 2006, and a follow-up workshop organised by the Social and Cultural Research Group at Royal Holloway, University of London in 2007.<sup>40</sup> Those discussions identified more general questions and issues concerning counterfactuals

and historical geography, that both provide themes for this issue and possible agendas for future research and reflection. In this section, we address some of these key questions.

### What are the Explicit and Implicit Historical Geographies in Existing Counterfactual Writings and Analyses?

The concern here is to make clear the significance of the spatial in counterfactual work, or to put it another way, to address the ‘where’ in what-if questions. As has already been suggested above, there is a category distinction that can be made between the ‘minimal rewrite’, switching event, style of counterfactual analysis with its spatio-temporal cone of consequences, and those counterfactuals that imagine different worlds or spatial assemblages. These two forms are not necessarily exclusive; in fictional counterfactual writing particularly, a switching event may be used to explain the emergence of an alternative world. There are nonetheless important distinctions between counterfactual work that starts with events, and that which concentrates on alternative worlds, not just in their analytical, rhetorical and emotional potential, but also in their approach to spatiality.<sup>41</sup>

Within these broad types, we are able to indicate ways in which the geographical is underplayed or unacknowledged in the construction of possibilities and alternatives. For example, the metaphor of the ‘path not taken’ is common in counterfactual speculation, but also indicates the potential interplay of temporalities and spatialities. A whole sub-set of counterfactual possibilities are bound up with the geographies of movement (literally of the paths not taken), and of presence and co-presence. To



borrow from Massey, if we shift from a sense of space as passive container and consequence of events in time, to a sense of space as contemporaneous plurality and co-existing trajectories, then we move towards discussions not so much of chance events, as chancy choreographies and the nature of ‘throwntogetherness’.<sup>42</sup>

### How Might Historical Geographers Think, Work and Write Counterfactually in Distinctive Ways?

Such a concern for chance in spaces of flows is one way that historical geographers might bring a distinctive approach to counterfactual work. This picks up on a long running concern within geography about ways of representing contemporaneous actions and agents separated in space, but actually or potentially connected by different kinds of flow and by the eventual consequences of actions.<sup>43</sup> The conventional counterfactual form is seductive in its simplicity, and powerfully engaging in its narrative form – once this single decision or event is changed, then this would most likely follow, then this, then this, and so on.<sup>44</sup> The narrative coherence of this form reinforces a particular politics of history; for the likes of Ferguson or Andrew Roberts this is not merely verification of the indeterminacy of history, but also of the potentially decisive power of key agents. While necessarily recognising inequalities of power, a counterfactualism that worked through multiple trajectories and possibilities – a geography of happenstance, rather than a singular point of chance – could indicate the limits of the significance of ‘great men’ (or indeed provide stronger affirmation of the relative powerlessness of some agents). Such a multiple and dispersed counterfactualism does of course rapidly become an impossibility as the number of elements increases. However even a more simple exercise focused on two

or three spatially-separated switching events has potential in exploring the overlapping patterns of consequences. An alternative form of geographical counterfactualism might emphasise the significance of crossing trajectories and co-presence in history, by considering meetings that might or might not have happened.

The initial example from Diamond indicates an extreme form of another way that historical geographers might pose distinctive counterfactual questions, by opening the more-than-human world to thoughts about chance and possibility. In considering why space matters, one potential strategy is to think through the possible consequences of changing space. In Diamond's example this does not result from a switching event and diverging pathways (perhaps located in the geo-physics of the break-up of Pangea), nor is there even a general assertion that this is a plausible alternative world. This is a pure example of a counterfactual thought experiment, but one that for all its implausibility, makes a powerful case about the implications of the actual continental alignments for the development of ecologies and civilizations. Yet our use of counterfactual thinking in relation to the natural world is not necessarily restricted to such abstract experiments. Hawthorn's work on plague and fertility regimes is both an indication of the potential value of counterfactual method in these 'hybrid geographies' and a warning against a Braudelian disposition to treat the natural world as external, slow-moving, and in a sense outside of the chanciness of human societies.

This sense of the chanciness of the nature is present in some conventional counterfactual history. For example, the capricious weather of the English Channel has been a particularly fruitful source of intuitively plausible switching events: what if the seas had been calm in 1588, or the 'Protestant wind' had not carried William of

Orange safely to Torbay a hundred years later?<sup>45</sup> Disease, particularly as a cause of sudden death of ‘great men’ also plays a regular part in counterfactual speculation. However, we should be prepared to go beyond such specific examples of the chanciness of the ‘natural’ world. Recent work in the physical sciences, notably in the study of rapid climate change, indicates the unfixity and unpredictability of natural systems; related work also indicates the unforeseen and lasting ‘natural’ consequences of human actions. The asking of environmental what-if questions can be a powerful tool in revealing the limits of conventional assumptions about the stability and resilience of different social and political formations.

#### What are the Historical Geographies of Counterfactual Analyses and Writing?

There are very many examples of counterfactual analyses and of counterfactual writing. This is also an extensive literature within philosophy and historiography on the nature of counterfactual method. What are conspicuously absent are cultural and geographical studies of the context of counterfactual thought, or what might be described as historical geographies of counterfactualism itself. Two inter-related issues would be central to such work. First, a historical geography of counterfactualism would be concerned to identify the kinds of societies where counterfactual thought has flourished, been repressed, or simply not considered a possibility. Within the limited context of academic and intellectual cultures it is possible to make some initial suggestions. Tetlock and Parker suggest, in passing, that ‘the debate for and against counterfactual history has engaged British and American historians notably more than historians from other countries’.<sup>46</sup> Whether this observation can be generalised to wider intellectual cultures is hard to judge; it

might be suggested that resistance to certain kinds of meta-narratives in Anglo-American intellectual worlds facilitates a history of possibility, and also that the strength of the analytical philosophy of causality in the Anglophone world invites historical speculation about alternative chains of events in ways that more holistic ‘continental’ philosophies do not. Certainly, one might expect deterministic theories of history, most obviously historical materialism, to leave limited scope for speculation about possible paths, though even in the case of Marxism there are marked cultural differences in the significance granted to the paths not taken, as famously demonstrated by E. P. Thompson’s attacks on the closure of Althusserian Marxism.<sup>47</sup> Counterfactual speculation, with its emphasis on contingent causalities might also be allergic to stronger varieties of postmodernism; where claims are made for ‘a depthless horizontality of immediate connections’ the exploration of possible trajectories and consequences is shut down.<sup>48</sup>

Turning from intellectual life to wider popular cultures indicates even more strongly the absence of systematic work on the historical geography of counterfactual thought. Do times of political, military or financial crisis encourage speculation not just about possible futures, but also about alternative pasts and presents? Do repressive regimes effectively shut down the desire to imagine alternatives, or is this a particular form of cultural resistance? Is counterfactual thinking a bourgeois indulgence giving the frisson of insecurity and adventure to the secure and stable, or is its wider appeal rooted in a desire to show how easily things might have been different?<sup>49</sup> There is some work on the social and cultural context, particularly concerning gender differences, in work on the psychology of counterfactual thinking, which explores

regret and 'if-only' patterns of thought.<sup>50</sup> What there is not is wider study of the contexts of popular counterfactual culture.

Related to this is a paucity of study of the subject and content of counterfactual speculation (and again particularly of specific cultural and historical context of the salience and popularity of certain counterfactuals.) Karen Hellekson's study of the genre of the alternate history traces the development of a specific genre of counterfactual writing, beginning with Louis-Napoléon Geoffroy-Chateau's 1836 imagining of triumphant Bonaparte establishing a global French Empire instead of rotting on St Helena.<sup>51</sup> Clearly this early example establishes one particular stimulus for rethinking history, on the part of the losing side in conflict. The clustering of counterfactual thinking around the course and outcome of the American Civil War also owes something to this, while it is to be hoped that the seemingly endless variations on the theme of a Nazi victory in the Second World War have somewhat different motivations.<sup>52</sup> More generally there is work to be done that maps the changing significance of what-if (and perhaps, saliently, if-only) moments in different cultures.

#### What Political, Ethical and Emotional Demands do Counterfactuals Make?

Although perhaps not as forthrightly expressed as E. P. Thompson's denunciation, some geographers might be instinctively wary about counterfactualism, not least because of its recent association with a particular New Right politics, as in the work of Roberts and Ferguson. Yet, is counterfactualism necessarily a nostalgic or revisionist historical mode concerned with what *ought* to have been, or is it rather, as

a number of papers in this collection argue, an anti-deterministic form of argument that insists on the radical openness of the past? Recently, Crystal Bartolovich has used what she describes as ‘critical counterfactualism’ as a method of questioning the hegemonies of neo-liberalism and American power.<sup>53</sup> Instead of judging counterfactualism in any generalised or *a priori* sense, one of the tasks for historical geographers is to explore the work that specific counterfactuals perform, including the political, ethical and emotional demands they make. This is important because counterfactual writings and analyses exist beyond the academic sphere in the world at large, where they are mobilised to differing success with the intention of having effects on audiences. These may derive from the rhetorical or persuasive force of the conjectural line of reasoning, but also from the dramatic and emotional impact of evoking specific worlds that might have been. Hence, to explore the path not taken is not just to experiment with cause and effect, but is also to consider how the world might have been different – for example how history might have had different ‘winners’ and ‘losers’.

In imagining a world where, say, the Atlantic slavery system involved European slaves and African masters, we are not concerned with its plausibility, but with ways of judging and measuring its consequences, and considering what is revealed about our world.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, insofar as it is successful, such a dramatic counterfactual works not by adhering to a minimal rewriting of history, but by its use of conjecture to provoke, engage and move audiences. As this suggests, there is work to be done on how counterfactuals work by providing disturbing reversals that can generate shock, anger and empathy, as well as understanding. While most readily apparent in speculative fiction, counterfactual claims with similar purpose are also apparent in

political discourse. It is important for historical geographers to examine the work done by specific counterfactuals, as well as what motivates them and how they are received.

### INTRODUCING THE PAPERS

These themes are developed in various ways by the papers in this special edition. The philosopher Mark Day connects debates concerning the metaphysics and epistemology of counterfactuals to the methodological concerns of historical geography. He argues that counterfactuals are an intrinsic element of any discussions of cause and effect. However, Day also argues against those who seek to limit the use of counterfactuals to, in particular, rational action, or systems that are inherently and obviously chancy. Instead he contends that the inevitability of implied counterfactuals should give license for an expanded role for counterfactual method in historical geography, in the forms of daring imaginary experiments and the innovative questioning of ‘what might have been’.

Peter Hugill’s grand-scale rewriting of American history certainly employs plenty of the kind of boldness advocated by Day to show the fundamental significance of slavery and cotton agriculture in the developing global economy and geopolitical world order of the early nineteenth century. Strikingly, Hugill employs an imagined rewriting of Ralph Brown’s *Historical Geography of the United States*, written from the American Empire of 1948. The essay starts from a highly plausible counterfactual, indeed one that fits Ferguson’s tight rules that permit only courses of action that were actively considered in the past. Hugill imagines (and Brown

narrates) that Thomas Jefferson had taken steps to end slavery at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Running alongside the text, with its distinctive tone of American imperialist triumphalism, is a different narrative in the notes that substantiates this alternative history and geography with reference to key insights from established work on slavery, geopolitics, ecology, economics, labour systems theory and the study of the intersections of capitalism and technology. The counterfactual is both provocative and entertaining. Like many counterfactual writings there is a tendency to play to the potential ironies of the details of alternative worlds (so movie studios appear in San Antonio and Cuba). However, the essay has two more serious points. Firstly, Hugill uses this device to emphasise the vital significance of the economies, ecologies and politics of cotton in the nineteenth century. He argues that cotton was a close equivalent of oil in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and that control of global cotton markets and production was fundamental in the developing world order. Secondly, Hugill uses his counterfactual not to argue that the rise of an expansive American Empire was inevitable from the moment that Jefferson freed the slaves, but rather to develop Don Meinig's rejection of American exceptionalism and the doctrine of manifest destiny.

Colin Pooley's imagining of twentieth-century Britain as a landscape without the private car has some features in common with Robert Fogel's work on railways and American economic growth. Like Fogel, Pooley imagines what might have happened without a major development in transport infrastructure; and like Fogel, Pooley's conclusion is that differences were likely to have been less than might be expected. One justification for counterfactual experiment is in providing a way of exploring the significance of factors that are assumed to be essential components of certain



historical and geographical developments. However, Pooley's concerns are less about the economic effects of private motoring than political and ecological debates about the development of personal mobility. Pooley argues that this work has the potential to undermine those who argue for the car's centrality to ways of life in Britain today.

The next two papers focus on the politics in and of counterfactuals. Historians Li Narangoa and Robert Cribb address the contingency of political geography by considering a series of unfulfilled territorial configurations. They draw on A. B. Shamsul's idea of 'nations-of-intent', which originally refers to competing political visions within the nation-state, and extend it to provide a tool for conceptualising international borders that might have been. Li and Cribb use this to consider the different territorial visions that were articulated in three main post-colonial contexts: Inner and Outer Mongolia in early twentieth century, Indo-China after 1945 and Malaysia from the late 1950s. In final part of the paper, they speculate on the political implications of differently-configured borders in each of these regions. By basing their what-if scenarios largely on policies that were actually considered and promoted by key actors, including political parties and former colonial powers, Li and Cribb use counterfactuals to open up the spaces of political geography.

David Lambert's paper considers the role of counterfactualism in a series of 'black Atlantic' contexts, aiming to show that speculative reasoning has characterised attempts to represent and demand recognition for the horror, inhumanity and injustice of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and New World slavery, as well as their legacies. He focuses on three contemporaneous examples: the arguments deployed by campaigners for slavery reparations in the USA that make use of a 'counterfactual conception of

compensation’; similar arguments mobilised in an African context that draw on longer-standing notions of ‘underdevelopment’; and the speculative fiction of the African-American author, Steven Barnes, which imagines a world in which Africans enslave Europeans. He argues that their conjectural concerns evince a particular way of engaging with slavery and aftermaths that differs from the more familiar tropes of ghostly return, haunting and trauma. In this way, he opens up new lines of historical-geographical enquiry that will enhance understanding of both how the past is made present, and Atlantic slavery and its legacies.

Like Lambert’s examination of Barnes, in the final paper James Kneale also eschews a straightforward reading of the counterfactual content of alternative fiction in his discussion of Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Years of Rice and Salt*. In what initially might appear to be a counter-intuitive move, Kneale approaches this alternative history of a world without Europe as a utopian text, drawing on work that argues that utopia should be thought of as an on-going critique of the present rather than a blueprint for the future. In this light, alternative histories such as the *Years of Rice and Salt* can be considered utopian because they help to re-enchant the relationship between the past and the present by reminding us that space is multiple and open. This sense of openness has been most forcefully articulated by Massey and in Kneale’s paper as elsewhere, her work serves as a touchstone and inspiration for asking questions about what might have been.

These papers are, we would argue, a starting point for a more extensive flourishing of thinking about counterfactuals in geography. We are not unequivocal advocates of all forms of counterfactual work, and there are certainly plenty of examples of

counterfactual writing that fail either as tightly defined exercises in cause-and-effect, or as broader thought-experiments along the lines of Diamond's, or else as creatively imagined alternative worlds. Nonetheless we do advocate further work in historical geography, particularly as indicated by our four broad questions above. We have two rather disparate motivations for this. First we believe that the re-engagement with issues of causality implied by counterfactual experiment could be an important contribution towards what has become known in Geography as 'conversations across the divide'.<sup>55</sup> We are not suggesting a return to the positivistic modelling of past events argued for by Norton. Instead what we are arguing for are extended notions of cause and possibility, that bring distinctive qualities from the humanities as well as from disciplines such as social psychology and political science. Our second motivation for recommending counterfactual approaches is because of their potential for the geographical imagination. Good counterfactual writing is about the pleasures and enchantments of imagining how things might have been, or might be different. It is about open thinking, that can work positively through the notion of possibility, and it is also a form that has tremendous potential for connection and engagement with wider popular imaginations.

## REFERENCES

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<sup>1</sup> Based on D. Massey, *For space*, London, 2005, 1-3. See also J. Diamond, *Guns, germs and steel: A short history of everybody for the last 13,000 years*, London, 1998, 355.

<sup>2</sup> Massey, *For space*, 120.

<sup>3</sup> Massey, *For space*, 9, 120.

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<sup>4</sup> Diamond, *Guns, germs and steel*, 355.

<sup>5</sup> Diamond, *Guns, germs and steel*, 355.

<sup>6</sup> For geographical critiques of Diamond's work, see J. M. Blaut, Environmentalism and Eurocentrism, *Geographical Review* 89 (1999) 391-408; G. Judkins, M. Smith, and E. Keys, Determinism within human-environment research and the rediscovery of environmental causation, *Geographical Journal* 174 (2008) 17-29, 24. Judkins et al write that '[th]e characterisation of early environmental determinism as forcibly racist allows Diamond to distance himself from this work by claiming a secondary objective, namely putting to rest any lingering racist explanations for societal differences'.

<sup>7</sup> Massey, *For space*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> See especially Massey, *For space*, 130-142.

<sup>9</sup> Diamond, *Guns, germs and steel*, 176-191.

<sup>10</sup> See Massey, *For space*, 130-137.

<sup>11</sup> Massey, *For space*, 111.

<sup>12</sup> Massey, *For space*, 14. Massey's discussion draws significantly on John Lechte's discussion of the connections between perspectives in post-Newtonian science and postmodern philosophy. See J. Lechte, (Not) belonging in postmodern space, in: S. Watson and K. Gibson (Eds), *Postmodern Cities and Spaces*, Oxford, 1995, 99-111.

<sup>13</sup> For discussion of the applicability of complexity science to human geography, see D. Massey, Space-time, 'science' and the relationship between physical geography and human geography, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* NS 24 (1999) 261-76; D. O'Sullivan, Complexity science and human geography, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* NS 29 (2004) 282-95.

<sup>14</sup> P. E. Tetlock and A. Belkin, Counterfactual thought experiments in world politics,

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in: P. E. Tetlock and A. Belkin (Eds), *Counterfactual thought experiments in world politics: Logical, methodological, and psychological perspectives*, Princeton, NJ, 1996, 1-38.

<sup>15</sup> See N. Gilbert and K. Troitzsch, *Simulation for the Social Scientist*, Milton Keynes, 2005.

<sup>16</sup> It is notable that David O'Sullivan, in his discussion of complexity science and human geography, rejects stronger claims that simulations can produce direct knowledge of the 'real' world, in favour of 'a view of complexity science in which models are seen as a source of geographical narratives (stories, plots, dramas) describing how the world is, and how it might be'. See O'Sullivan, *Complexity science and human geography*, 291.

<sup>17</sup> W. Norton, *Historical Analysis in Geography*, Harlow, 1984, 61.

<sup>18</sup> R. Fogel, *Railroads and American Economic Growth. Essays in Econometric History*, Baltimore, 1964; R. Fogel and S. Engerman, *Time on the Cross. The Economics of American Negro Slavery*. Boston, 1974. See also R. Fogel, The new economic history: its findings and methods, *Economic History Review* 19 (1966) 642-56.

<sup>19</sup> See for example, essays in P. E. Tetlock and A. Belkin (Eds), *Counterfactual thought experiments in world politics: Logical, methodological, and psychological perspectives*, Princeton, NJ, 1996.

<sup>20</sup> D. Gregory, Counterfactual explanation, in: R. Johnston, D. Gregory and D. Smith, *The Dictionary of Human Geography* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Oxford, 1986, 76. Significantly, the entry for 'counterfactuals' by Trevor Barnes in the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of the Dictionary is much more open to their potential, but without giving any concrete examples of their use in historical geography. T. Barnes, Counterfactuals in: D. Gregory, R. Johnston,

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G. Pratt, M. Watts and S. Whatmore, *The Dictionary of Human Geography* 5<sup>th</sup> ed., Oxford, 2009, 119.

<sup>21</sup> E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, London, 1955; E. H. Carr, *What is History?* Harmondsworth, 1964, 97.

<sup>22</sup> D. Fisher, *Historians' Fallacies: Towards a Logic of Historical Thought*, New York, 1970, 18.

<sup>23</sup> M. Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes*, Cambridge, 1933, 139.

<sup>24</sup> D. Henige, The alchemy of turning fiction into truth, *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 39 (2008) 354-372, quote at 359.

<sup>25</sup> See discussion of such critiques of counterfactual experiment in G. Hawthorn, *Plausible worlds: Possibility and understanding in history and the social sciences*, Cambridge, 1991, 6-7.

<sup>26</sup> P. E. Tetlock and G. Parker, Counterfactual thought experiments. Why we can't live without them and how we must learn to live with them, in: P. E. Tetlock, R. N. Lebow, and G. Parker (Eds), *Unmaking the West: "What-if?" scenarios that rewrite world history*, Ann Arbor, 2006, 14-44.

<sup>27</sup> N. Ferguson (Ed.), *Virtual history: Alternatives and counterfactuals*, London, 1997.

<sup>28</sup> This justification for counterfactuals has been developed by other conservative historians. See A. Roberts (Ed.), *What Might Have Been*, London, 2004.

<sup>29</sup> Hawthorn, *Plausible worlds*; P. E. Tetlock and A. Belkin (Eds), *Counterfactual thought experiments in world politics*; P. E. Tetlock, R. N. Lebow, and G. Parker (Eds), *Unmaking the West*.

<sup>30</sup> The concern here is primarily with specific, worked, through examples of counterfactual worlds. It should also be noted that the philosopher David Lewis's influential work on counterfactuals and the philosophy of causality develops Leibniz's

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notion of multiple alternative possible worlds or universes. See D. Lewis, *Counterfactuals*, Oxford, 1973, and comments in the following article by Mark Day

<sup>31</sup> Tetlock and Belkin, *Counterfactual thought experiments in world politics*, 10-11.

<sup>32</sup> Hawthorn, *Plausible worlds*, 61.

<sup>33</sup> See for example the special edition on ‘Counterfactuals and the Historian of Science’ edited by G. Radick in *Isis* 99 (2008) 547-84.

<sup>34</sup> P. E. Tetlock, R. N. Lebow, and G. Parker (Eds), *Unmaking the West: “What-if?” scenarios that rewrite world history*, Ann Arbor, 2006.

<sup>35</sup> Tetlock and Belkin (Eds), *Counterfactual thought experiments in world politics*.

<sup>36</sup> D. Carr, Place and time: On the interplay of historical points of view, *History and theory* 40 (2001) 153-167.

<sup>37</sup> See K. Hellekson, *The alternate history: Refiguring historical time*, Kent, Ohio and London, 2001; C. Gallagher, When did the Confederate States of America free the slaves?, *Representations* 98 (2007) 53-62.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, H. Turtledove, *How few remain*, London, 1997, which is the first of what is known as the ‘Timeline-191’ series of novels set between an alternative 1861 and 1945.

<sup>39</sup> W. Gibson and B. Sterling, *The difference engine*, London, 1990; N. Stephenson, *Anatheim*, London, 2008.

<sup>40</sup> Another output of those sessions is provided in Klaus Dodds’ use of counterfactuals, hinging on the result of the November 2000 election, as a way of exploring the geopolitics of the global war on terror. K. Dodds, Counter-factual geopolitics: President Al Gore, September 11<sup>th</sup> and the global war on terror, *Geopolitics* 13 (2008), 73-99.

<sup>41</sup> See Hellekson, *The alternate history*, 5.

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<sup>42</sup> Massey, *For space*.

<sup>43</sup> See the review of such approaches to geographical writing in P. Crang, The politics of polyphony: reconfigurations in geographical authority, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 10 (1992), 527-49.

<sup>44</sup> The appeal of counterfactual thought in historical narratives is in part driven by the pervasiveness of counterfactual thinking in everyday life, particularly in the form, ‘if only I had ...’ See below and discussions in D. Mandel, D. Hilton, and P. Catellani (Eds), *The Psychology of Counterfactual Thinking*, Abingdon 2005.

<sup>45</sup> See C. Eire, Religious kitsch or industrial revolution - what difference would a Catholic England make?, in: P. E. Tetlock, R. N. Lebow, and G. Parker (Eds), *Unmaking the West: “What-if?” scenarios that rewrite world history*, Ann Arbor, 2006, 145-167; J. Goldstone, Europe’s peculiar path - would the world be ‘modern’ if William III’s invasion of England in 1688 had failed?, in: P. E. Tetlock, R. N. Lebow, and G. Parker (Eds), *Unmaking the West: “What-if?” scenarios that rewrite world history*, Ann Arbor, 2006, 168-196.

<sup>46</sup> Tetlock and Belkin, Counterfactual thought experiments in world politics, 36, note 2.

<sup>47</sup> Particularly in E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and other essays*, London 1978. Interestingly Thompson here again uses his favourite pejorative, ‘Geschichtenscheissenschlopf’ (unhistorical shit) for Althusserian structuralism, rather than counterfactual method (as in his earlier work on William Morris).

<sup>48</sup> Massey, *For space*, 76.

<sup>49</sup> Explicit cross cultural differences in counterfactual thinking are discussed in J. Chen, C-Y. Chiu, N. Roese, K-P. Tam and I. Y-M. Lau, Culture and counterfactuals: on the importance of life domains *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 37 (2006)



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<sup>50</sup> See discussion of their social context model of counterfactual constraints in P. Catellani and P. Milesi, When the social context frames the case. Counterfactuals in the courtroom, in: Mandel, Hilton, and Catellani (Eds), *The Psychology of Counterfactual Thinking*, 183-98.

<sup>51</sup> Hellekson, *The alternate history*.

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, J. Bresnahan (Ed.), *Revisioning the Civil War. Historians on Counter-Factual Senarios*, Jefferson North Carolina, 2006.

<sup>53</sup> C. Bartolovich, History after the end of history: Critical counter-factualism and revolution, *New Formations* 59 (2006) 63-80.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, B. Evaristo, *Blonde roots*, London, 2008, and the paper by Lambert in this special edition.

<sup>55</sup> See S. Harrison, D. Massey and K. Richards, Conversations across the divide, *Geoforum* 39 (2008), 549-551.