

Counterfactual Thinking – Counterfactual Writing

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# Counterfactual Thinking – Counterfactual Writing

Edited by Dorothee Birke, Michael Butter,  
Tilman Köppe

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*Michael Butter, Dorothee Birke (Freiburg), and Tilmann Köppe (Göttingen)*

## Introduction: England Win

On June 26, 2010, the German soccer team beat England 4–1 in the first knockout stage of the FIFA World Cup in South Africa. Afterwards, the international media hailed this victory as the inevitable triumph of a young, inspired, and well-organized side over an aged and spiritless opponent. However, there were also voices that stressed that despite the German superiority throughout most of the match the result could have been quite different if England’s second goal had not been disallowed by the referee, who did not see that Frank Lampard’s shot in the 39th minute had crossed the line. “[I]f it was a draw that would have been very important for us”, the enraged England manager Fabio Capello complained afterwards, reminding journalists that the goal would have leveled the score at 2–2 and suggesting that his team might then have gone on to win the match.<sup>1</sup> Based on the premise of “what if . . .”, Capello’s complaint is a wonderful example of counterfactual thinking, which the social psychologist Keith Markman and his colleagues define as “the imagination of alternatives to reality”.<sup>2</sup>

We have chosen this example not only because it allows for the playful reversal of the most prominent illustration used in introductory texts on counterfactual thinking – what if Germany had won World War II – but because it captures two important aspects of developing such scenarios. First, it shows that mentally constructing alternatives to what really happened is indeed a wide-spread human practice, “something familiar to everyone”, even if they have never heard about the concept, as Neal Roese and Jim Olson have pointed out.<sup>3</sup> After all, it was not only Capello who harbored the thought that things could have turned out differently but everybody who had watched the game.

<sup>1</sup> Capello quoted in Sachin Nakrani, “Fabio Capello Says ‘Little Thing’ behind England Exit”, in: *The Guardian*, June 27, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/football/2010/jun/27/world-cup-england-germany1> (July 15, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Keith D. Markman/Igor Gavanski/Stephen J. Sherman/Matthew N. McCullen, “The Mental Simulation of Better and Worse Possible Worlds”, in: *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 29/1993, pp. 87–109, p. 93.

<sup>3</sup> Neal Roese/James M. Olson, “Preface”, in: Neal Roese/James M. Olson (eds.), *What Might Have Been: The Social Psychology of Counterfactual Thinking*, Mahwah, NJ, 1995, pp. vii–xi, p. vii.

Second, the example of the disallowed goal illustrates nicely the two major effects that counterfactual thinking achieves according to psychologists. To begin with, counterfactuals achieve a “contrast effect”, as they sharpen the awareness of an actual state or outcome through the mental juxtaposition with a possible one. As Roese and Morrison put it: “[A] factual outcome may be judged to be worse if a more desirable alternative outcome is salient, and that same outcome may be judged better if a less desirable alternative outcome is salient”.<sup>4</sup> Capello feels the sting of defeat all the more because he can easily imagine a match in which England equalize and eventually win. He thus constructs what psychologists call an “upward” counterfactual. For the German side, the situation is more complicated. The players and the coach may mentally construct a “downward” counterfactual in which they lost the game and therefore feel especially relieved that they haven’t. But they may also construct an upward counterfactual in which there is no disallowed goal so that their otherwise convincing victory shines all the brighter. Thus, the phantom goal may increase or decrease their joy. By contrast, what psychologists describe as the “causal inference effect” refers to the power of counterfactual scenarios to yield insights into the causes of the actual outcome.<sup>5</sup> If FIFA had been using the video proof, the goal would have been allowed and all subsequent discussions about the effect of disallowing it mute, all sides agreed after the game. And in fact, due to the public outcry over the referee’s mistake, FIFA announced its intention to reconsider its stance on this issue. Counterfactual thinking, then, can at least potentially influence future decisions.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Neal Roese/Mike Morrison, “The Psychology of Counterfactual Thinking”, in: *Historical Social Research* 34.2/2009 (Special Issue: Counterfactual Thinking as a Scientific Method, ed. Roland Wenzlhuemer), pp. 16–26, p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Roese/Morrison, “Psychology”, pp. 19–20.

<sup>6</sup> On the influence on future decisions, cf. also Orit E. Tycocinski/Thane S. Pittman, “The Consequences of Doing Nothing: Inaction Inertia as Avoidance of Anticipated Counterfactual Regret”, in: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 75/1998, pp. 607–616. Moreover, the example highlights that counterfactual scenarios and the probability ascribed to them are very often closely connected to, and in fact dependent on, the ideological position of those who develop them. Driven by the motivation to justify his team’s performance, to shield them against criticism, and maybe to protect his job, England manager Capello stresses that the disallowed goal was the turning point of the game. He thus ascribes a high probability to the counterfactual scenario that England would have won if the goal had counted. Unsurprisingly, his German counterpart, keen to play down the significance of the scene and to praise his own team, argued that his side would have won even if the goal had been allowed. Most of the English media supported this reading of events, because the journalists did not want to provide Capello with an opportunity to distract from the poor performance of his team throughout the tournament.

We have begun with an example that illustrates what psychologists have to say about counterfactual thinking, since their take on the concept is the most easily accessible one. As pointed out above, the discipline operates with a common-sense notion of what constitutes “counterfactuality”. Moreover, the many studies that psychologists have conducted over the past two decades have surely impacted heavily on the use of the concept in various other disciplines such as economics, historiography, or political science.<sup>7</sup> However, we believe that Roland Wenzlhuemer – in the introduction to a recent collection of essays on “Counterfactual Thinking as a Scientific Method” – is only presenting part of the picture when he argues that the research in psychology “has paved the way for the current revival of the issue [of counterfactual thinking] in other disciplines”.<sup>8</sup> There are a number of disciplines where the concept is currently *en vogue* too, but which operate with notions of counterfactuality very different from the one prevalent in psychology and other social sciences. Whereas, for example, psychologists and historians alike hold that “[a]ll counterfactual conditionals are causal assertions”,<sup>9</sup> cognitive linguistics rejects this idea. And while this branch of linguistics regards counterfactual thinking as a very common feature of human cognition and language, analytical philosophy inquires into the intricate logical and semantic features of counterfactual conditionals and puts them to use for analyzing various objectives in metaphysics or the philosophy of science.

The aim of this volume, therefore, is to provide an overview of the current definitions and uses of the concept of counterfactuality across the disciplines of philosophy, historiography, political sciences, psychology, linguistics, physics, and literary studies. Although Andrea Albrecht and Lutz Danneberg’s essay as well as the contribution by Bernhard Kleeberg investigate the history of counterfactual thinking, it is not our objective here to provide a genealogy of this mode of reasoning. Rather, we wish to map the field as it currently is. A basic distinction that we wish to propose – one that organizes the volume – is between disciplines such as psychology, for which counter-

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Roland Wenzlhuemer, “Editorial: Unpredictability, Contingency and Counterfactuals”, in: *Historical Social Research* 34.2/2009 (Special Issue: Counterfactual Thinking as a Scientific Method, ed. Roland Wenzlhuemer), pp. 9–15, p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> Wenzlhuemer, “Editorial”, p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> Neal Roese/James M. Olson, “Counterfactual Thinking: A Critical Overview”, in: Neal Roese/James M. Olson (eds.), *What Might Have Been: The Social Psychology of Counterfactual Thinking*, Mahwah, NJ, 1995, pp. 1–55, p. 11. For the historian’s perspective, cf. Roland Wenzlhuemer, “Counterfactual Thinking as a Scientific Method”, in: *Historical Social Research* 34.2/2009 (Special Issue: Counterfactual Thinking as a Scientific Method, ed. Roland Wenzlhuemer), pp. 27–54, pp. 30–33.

factuals constitute an object of study, and disciplines such as historiography that employ counterfactual thinking as a method. In the former case, researchers investigate the thought experiments undertaken by others; in the latter they engage in thought experiments themselves.<sup>10</sup> While the former seems to be fairly uncontroversial, the latter is a highly contested practice.

With such different notions and uses of counterfactuality in circulation, it is obviously impossible to synthesize the various definitions and deployments in a fashion that all disciplines can agree on. This, however, we would like to suggest, should not be regarded as a problem that needs to be solved, but rather as a starting point for interdisciplinary exchange. The controversy that is bound to arise when irreconcilable definitions of a concept are put next to each other can, as cultural theorist Mieke Bal has argued, be seen as “an asset rather than a liability” – as long as we openly reflect and discuss them.<sup>11</sup> Bal suggests that scholars who use such concepts within the boundaries of their own disciplines are often tempted to take their understanding of them for granted. This is no longer possible once we encounter other ways of understanding and using them. As Bal puts it: “Concepts are sites of debate, awareness of difference, and tentative exchange. Agreeing doesn’t mean agreeing on content, but agreeing on the basic rules of the game: if you use a concept at all, you use it in a particular way so that you can meaningfully disagree on content”.<sup>12</sup>

For example, the definitions of counterfactuality in cognitive linguistics and analytical philosophy are obviously at odds with each other. However, putting these different notions into a dialogue with each other brings to the fore the differing assumptions about the nature of language and cognition that inform their mutually exclusive usage. The common reference to counterfactuality thus enables a discussion about the larger issues at stake. This is not to say, of course, that there are no similarities in the ways counterfactuality is theorized by several disciplines, and we have explained above that disciplines such as psychology, historiography, or political sciences define the concept almost exactly alike. What we wish to emphasize, though, is that interdisciplinary exchange is not only possible in cases where several disciplines more or less agree on a definition of counterfactuality, but that it might be of particular interest if they do not.

<sup>10</sup> Our volume thus covers considerably more ground than the recent special issue of *Historical Social Research* dedicated to “Counterfactual Thinking as a Scientific Method”.

<sup>11</sup> Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*. Toronto, 2002, p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> Bal, *Concepts*, p. 13.

In arranging the articles in this volume, we opted for a roughly disciplinary ordering of the articles. Starting with three contributions with a broadly philosophical orientation, including the philosophy of literature and the philosophy of science, we will then move on to physics, psychology, cognitive linguistics, history of science, history, political science, and, finally, various historical as well as systematic investigations of different kinds of counterfactuality in literature. Surveying the articles, however, one quickly notices that the idea of a neat disciplinary classification ought to be taken with a grain of salt. Scholars inquiring into counterfactuals seem to have a predilection for poaching in neighboring fields. Therefore, not only is the ordering of the disciplines themselves somewhat arbitrary, but the very idea of disciplinary boundaries seems to be under attack when it comes to counterfactuals. We certainly feel that this must be welcomed rather than bemoaned.

The first three articles share philosophical points of reference. Starting with a semi-formal definition of counterfactual imagination, *Andrea Albrecht* and *Lutz Danneberg* enquire into its various types, cognitive functions, and criteria of success, emphasizing that both the functions and criteria of success are highly context-sensitive aspects which have to be studied on a case-by-case basis. The bulk of their paper is then devoted to differentiating counterfactual imaginations from neighboring notions, namely metaphors, fictions, *ceteris-paribus* clauses, abstractions, idealizations, presumptions, and models. In doing this, they are setting the stage for both Tobias Klauk’s more extended comparison of possible-worlds accounts of fiction and Daniel Dohrn’s discussion of counterfactual aspects of abstraction and idealization in scientific experiments. Finally, Albrecht and Danneberg employ their insights for the analysis of two extended historical case studies.

*Tobias Klauk*’s paper carefully examines the thesis that in writing and reading fiction we typically conduct counterfactual thought experiments. Based on an account of philosophical thought experiments according to which they consist of three consecutive steps, namely the imagining of a scenario, its evaluation concerning a certain question, and its argumentative utilization, he concludes that this thesis is, ultimately, false. This does not mean, however, that we cannot gain insight from comparing fiction to counterfactual scenarios as they are employed in thought experiments. Two domains that prove especially fruitful in this respect are the possible-worlds theory of fiction and the cognitive significance of fiction. As Klauk shows, the philosophical theory of counterfactuals can shed considerable light on both of these contested fields of inquiry.

*Daniel Dohrn* takes up the issue of the cognitive significance of fiction. He argues that in reading fiction, we typically explain fictional facts (“Why

does Ahab chase Moby Dick?") in ways analogous to our explanations of actual facts. In order to do so, we employ counterfactual thoughts, for which the world of the fiction plays the role that the actual world plays for counterfactual thought as we know it. What is more, for some fictions, we can relate our counterfactual explanations of fictive facts to the real world in just the way in which we transfer the results of counterfactual thought experiments to the real world. Fiction, therefore, can be said to have the same cognitive value as scientific thought experiments. In order to substantiate this claim, Dohrn develops and discusses various accounts of scientific thought experiments as well as models of explanation in natural and social science.

*Miko Elwenspoek* carries on this theme and explains in how far counterfactual thinking is a core research tool in physics. When physicists evaluate their theories, they often have to confront them with situations which for several reasons cannot be found in nature or reconstructed in the laboratory. In these cases, counterfactual thinking proves indispensable for evaluating these theories, as Elwenspoek illustrates using two examples from astronomy and the theory of electromagnetic forces. In the remaining part of his paper, he poses counterfactual what-if-questions concerning the so-called cosmological anthropic principle, which states, roughly, that the fact that human beings exist tells us something about certain cosmological conditions. By contrast, any alteration of the expansion rate of the universe, its three-dimensionality, its gravitational force, or the stability of atomic nuclei would make human life impossible.

*Patrizia Catellani* introduces counterfactual thinking from the perspective of social psychology. Here, different types and patterns of counterfactual thinking are distinguished and analyzed with regard to the different effects and functions they fulfill, such as their impact on our affective system and their use in preparing future actions as well as in explaining past actions and events. Her own research focuses on the uses and effects of counterfactual claims in political discourse. By way of qualitative and experimental studies, Catellani and her team have shown that the employment of counterfactual claims in Italian political discourse exhibits particular patterns, depending on parameters such as speaker, target, direction of the change imagined in the counterfactual, or controllability of the behavior addressed by the counterfactual. Understanding these patterns, she suggests, can heighten our political awareness and especially sharpen our sensibility to manipulative strategies employed by politicians as well as journalists.

*Martin Hilpert's* paper adds to the psychological perspective by focusing on the mental operations involved in counterfactual thinking. His field of re-

search, cognitive linguistics, is one of the most important branches of contemporary linguistics. It is concerned with the analysis of linguistic structures conceived of as direct reflections of human cognition. Counterfactual reasoning is thus explained by Hilpert as involving conceptual blending, that is, the ability to mentally overlap two conflicting situations. There is a large number of linguistic devices that involve blending mechanisms; these include grammatical phenomena of sentence length, negation, modality, causation, attributive constructions, and compounding. In closing, Hilpert suggests that, due to their fundamental character, the study of the mechanisms of conceptual integration can also shed some light on problems tackled in disciplines other than linguistics, thus foreshadowing the themes of several papers from literary studies.

*Bernhard Kleeberg's* exploration of Ernst Mach's and Max Weber's respective takes on thought experiments, a contribution to the history of science, moves the volume into the realms of the social sciences and humanities. Mach and Weber, he argues, endorsed thought experiments as powerful means of abstraction that allow researchers to understand the causal connections they are investigating. As Kleeberg demonstrates, they tried to define criteria that would prevent the counterfactual scenarios constructed in these thought experiments from turning into mere fantasy. In this regard, both of them, but Weber in particular, did not completely dismiss but heavily caution against the use of counterfactual thinking as a means of historical inquiry, as scholars are especially prone to let their imagination run wild and thus produce "grotesque results", as Weber puts it, when discussing how history could have taken a different course.

As Kleeberg observes in his conclusion, most historians have so far heeded Weber's warning and abstained from imagining, let alone writing counterfactual history. In recent years, however, an increasing number of historians, among them highly renowned scholars such as Alexander Demandt and Niall Ferguson, have begun to challenge the view that historiography should be concerned with what happened and not with what might have been. *Georg Christoph Berger Waldenegg* does not embrace counterfactual scenarios in historiography as wholeheartedly as these scholars have done, but he emphasizes that historians engage in counterfactual thinking all the time, although they are only seldom aware of it. His article sets out by summarizing extreme positions on the value of counterfactual thinking held by historians, gives an overview of the different definitions of counterfactuality employed by these scholars, and addresses the heavily debated question of whether only those possible courses of history that contemporaries contemplated should become the object of a historian's counterfactual reasoning.

After proposing a preliminary typology of the counterfactuals discernible in historiography, Berger Waldenegg provocatively concludes by suggesting that historians should reflect more deeply on their methods in general and that they must face the challenges posed by counterfactual historiography.

If Berger Waldenegg carefully weighs the pros and cons of constructing historical counterfactuals, *Richard Ned Lebow's* article makes a powerful argument in favor of counterfactual thinking in international relations and insists on the necessity of using counterfactuals in all social sciences. By way of two case studies of 20th-century history, Lebow demonstrates the shortcomings of the traditional approach taken in international relations, which rests on Humean causation and searches for regularities, and makes the case for counterfactual thinking as a way to recognize the importance of agency, immediate causes, and non-linear confluences. Lebow thus employs counterfactual scenarios in order to stress the pitfalls and limits of large-scale structural approaches and to insist on the contingencies of historical developments. For him, then, counterfactuals are a means both of historical inquiry and of further theorizing the field he is working in.

The last five contributions in the volume all come from the field of literary studies, and convey some idea of the broad scope of the uses of counterfactuality in literary texts – as well as of the concept of counterfactuality within this discipline. The most obvious of these uses (and, to date, the one that has been most extensively considered in research) is represented by a genre that can be seen as a fictional treatment of the historical “what if” scenarios as they are also looked at by Berger Waldenegg and Lebow: the so-called “alternate history” or “counterfactual historical novel”. *Andreas Martin Widmann's* contribution outlines a typology of novels which deliberately deviate from accepted versions of historical events. Drawing on the narratological distinction between “plot” and “story”, as it was proposed by the English novelist E.M. Forster, Widmann identifies two distinct types: the first is the “story-type”, which presents a fictional world in which an imagined event alters the course of history as we know it. While this is the kind of historical novel that is usually described as “counterfactual”, Widmann argues that there is also a second type, which has so far not been incorporated into studies on counterfactuality: the “plot-type”, in which the events stay the same, but the explanation for their causal connection is altered. He offers two case studies from contemporary German literature: Thomas Brussig's *Helden wie wir* (1995), in which a new explanation is offered for the fall of the Berlin wall, represents the plot-type, while Christian Kracht's *Ich werde hier sein im Sonnenschein und im Schatten* (2008), in which a counterfactual alteration of Lenin's biography has led to a drastically altered world order, is read as

an example of the story-type. Among the major functions that Widmann ascribes to counterfactual historical novels are the foregrounding of contingency in historical developments, but also the critique of dominant national self-images, which are exposed as ideological constructs.

In the feminist fictions that *Birte Christ* analyzes in her article, counterfactuality is also employed for social critique. Whether these works project alternate societies in which the hierarchy between male and female has been reversed or abandoned altogether, or imagine individuals who change their gender, they use counterfactual patterns to expose traditional gender roles as arbitrary and unjust. Christ shows how the binary logic of “fact” and “counterfact” serves to playfully reverse and thus question the kind of thinking that structures and hierarchizes society according to the binarism of “male” and “female”. Her analysis of four American feminist works from the 1910s and the 1970s, respectively, illustrates how these achieve both contrast effects and causal inference effects, which contribute to two overarching functions: “analytical”, i.e. offering an investigation and evaluation of existing structures of thought and power in American society, and “synthetic”, i.e. offering ways of rethinking or abandoning these structures.

Both Christ and Widmann emphasize the different ways in which novels with counterfactual plots can achieve the contrast effect: They can either explicitly compare counterfactual aspects to the actual reality of the reader, or they can rely on the recipient's ability to spot the discrepancies. A genre that typically offers an explicit comparison between two levels of reality, or worlds, is the time travel narrative that *Rüdiger Heinze* treats in his contribution. Counterfactuality becomes central to time travel narratives either when a protagonist travels back in time and his behavior changes the course of history, or when she travels forward and is faced with a version of “what might happen if”. Heinze looks at three prominent examples – two 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels, Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, and H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, and the film trilogy *Back to the Future* from the 1980s. He shows how the time travel trope is, for one thing, used for social commentary – especially Wells' and Twain's works are, in this respect, comparable to the works looked at by Widmann and Christ. Moreover, he focuses on the different notions of temporality and causality that are implicitly or explicitly endorsed by the texts.

While the previous three articles feature examples where counterfactual scenarios are in some sense presented as storyworlds in which characters interact, *Robyn Warhol* looks at the phenomenon from a different angle: She is interested in the way in which texts evoke counterfactual alternatives that are not acted out. Warhol focuses on the level of narrative mediation and traces



the use of what she calls “narrative refusals” – references to “what might have been and yet is not” – in the narrators’ commentaries in Charles Dickens’ novels. She demonstrates how by drawing the reader’s attention to events that are left out (“unnarration”) or that did not happen (“disnarration”), the novels create counterfactual storyworlds that prompt us to evaluate the world that is actually represented. Moreover, narrative refusals referring to characters’ actions contribute to an impression of psychological complexity. As in the examples analyzed by Daniel Dohrn, in these works the “factual” to which the “counterfactual” is opposed is no state in the actual world of the reader, but a fictional reality. Like Dohrn, Warhol proposes the term “counterfictionality” to clearly distinguish these cases from the kind of counterfactuality in fiction as it is described by Widmann or Christ.

“Counterfictionality” is also at the center of *Richard Saint-Gelais’* contribution. What distinguishes his use of the term from Warhol’s, however, is that he uses it in a more specific way, to describe the phenomenon of one fictional text changing the events told in a pre-existing one – as for example in Jacques Cellard’s novel *Emma, oh! Emma!*, which retells the story of *Madame Bovary* with a different ending. Saint-Gelais examines a wide scope of texts which feature this kind of counterfictionality, with a special focus on the question of how they foreground or, conversely, conceal their status as fiction. As he shows, counterfictionality can be employed to very different ends. In some cases it may be employed to remind the reader of the artificiality of the textual universe, which can be rewritten. The notion that counterfictionality is a quintessentially postmodernist strategy, however, would be mistaken: In other cases, it serves to strengthen narrative illusion, for example when the original fiction is “exposed” as a lie and the counterfiction presented as “what really happened”.<sup>13</sup>

All five articles on literary studies proceed from an understanding of counterfactuality that does not conflate it with the general notion of “fictionality”. In other words: the essays do not operate with the notion that all fictional literature should be regarded as “counterfactual” because it repre-

<sup>13</sup> These findings parallel one of the points made by Hilary P. Dannenberg in *Coincidence and Counterfactuality: Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction* (2008): Far from being limited to the realm of science fiction or postmodernist fiction, counterfactuality has played an important role in the history of narrative fiction. It has often contributed to a reality effect: When characters or narrators speculate about what could have happened, this may “strengthen the impression that the narrative world is ‘real’ by constructing a further, contrastive ‘less real’ sequence of events that reinforces the apparent reality of the narrative world” (p. 54). Characters may appear more complex, narrators more trustworthy.

sents invented scenarios. At the same time, however, they also show how productively literary texts employ the interplay between fictionality and counterfactuality in order to involve the reader in their fictional world, to make him or her think about the state of his or her actual world, or about the way in which texts themselves shape out thinking about “reality”. As a consequence, from the perspective of literary studies there are many ways of looking at counterfactual thinking as an “imagination of alternatives to reality”. Literary scholars may use counterfactual patterns to explore the ways in which our notions of ‘the real’ are engendered – a concern they share with historians and social scientists. Or they may, like psychologists, be interested in the impact of counterfactuals on our emotions and evaluations. For literary studies, then, ‘counterfactuality’ should prove a particularly valuable concept in the foreseeable future, one that will require and enable scholars interested in literature to enter into dialogues with colleagues from a broad variety of disciplines.