

Uchronia

by Emmanuelle Loyer

Counterfactual history is a matter of ‘ what ifs’. What if the Allies had lost the Second World War? What if there had been no transatlantic slave trade? Two French historians analyse the intellectual merits of this use of the past, long established in the Anglo-American world.

Reviewed: Quentin Deluermoz and Pierre Singaravélou, *Pour une histoire des possibles. Analyses contrefactuelles et possibles non advenus* (Paris: Seuil, 2016), 448 p., 24 €.

There are historiographical books that hold out great promise, but deliver very little. And there are others that do enough to fulfil their great promise, but not necessarily in the way one might imagine. *Pour une histoire des possibles* [Towards a history of possibles] is an inquiry based on a seminar, a bibliography, an educational experiment, and a set of practical applications. It is an ambitious endeavour, but also a courageous one insofar as the two authors do not simply point to the productive future horizons of this historical science: they put themselves to the test.

What is this new historical science? ‘Counterfactual’ history, which is also referred to as ‘What-if History’, ‘Uchronia’, ‘alternative history’ or ‘history with ifs and buts’ etc. in the Anglosphere where it has gained much traction. Until recently, it has rarely been appreciated or used in the French context. Elsewhere in the world, though, and especially in the United States and in both Great Britain and its former imperial and colonial spaces, it has long held an important place in writing about and making

use of the past, somewhere between history and fiction. As a literary genre, it developed in the nineteenth century and then moved into the twentieth century in a highly sought-after popular form of historiography (what if Napoleon had won at Waterloo? What if the Allies had lost the Second World War?), the intellectual merits of which were only appreciated by historians in the US and UK. In large part, this book by Quentin Deluermoz and Pierre Singaravélou, both historians of the nineteenth century, is about bringing France 'up to speed' in this area: about taking seriously a seemingly unserious type of history and acknowledging that counterfactual history is an effective tool for 'examining the discipline's frames of knowledge production'.

Examining Causes

The first and most explicit issue addressed in this book is therefore epistemological. It attests to the French discipline's current enthusiasm for historiography: a programmatic zeal expressed by a generation of historians who range widely, speak foreign languages, read international publications (albeit mainly in English), show an interest in reflexive thinking, possess theoretical ambitions, and examine their own writing practices. They are reacting as best they can to the late-twentieth-century apathy that followed history's golden period in the 1970s and 1980s and left historians unable to speak to a broader audience or to make their voices heard in the public sphere. For several years now, thanks to the imagination and audacity of this new generation, this trend seems to be reversing and bringing together a highly exacting form of history with a determined engagement in societal debate.

This book rapidly convinces the reader of the value of counterfactual reasoning, its many uses, and its many scales of application: imagining the possibility of a different outcome encourages direct reflection about the types of causalities set in motion, about their hierarchy and, ultimately, about pure contingency as an inescapable horizon, for all the discipline's efforts to erase it over the course of the last two centuries. Historical science, as constructed in the late-nineteenth century and throughout much of the twentieth century, aims to identify the laws of historical development according to a model analogous to the laws of nature. Chance, the grain of sand that throws things off course, should have no place in such a model. In fact, though, counterfactual reasoning is present at specific points in Fernand Braudel's work ('imagine that the easily accessible mines of the New World had been snatched away from Castille, then...') or in what the authors refer to as 'hidden' counterfactuals

(because they are not explicitly identified as such), which are nothing more than historiographical bias (for example, with regard to Western superiority or the evolutionary mindset). Counterfactual reasoning is a reflexive habit and, when applied to the short term, it can reveal 'the constraints, reproductive mechanisms, and routines that organise social worlds'. Ultimately, it renews macro-history's programme while, at the same time, creating new connections between the notions of causality and contingency by explaining, as Roger Chartier did for the French Revolution,¹ that it could as well not have happened, even as it fits socio-cultural and politico-economic evolutions into a logic of intelligibility that help to make sense of them.

This use of counterfactual history breaks with its habitual right-wing (and, in the US, neo-conservative) applications, in which Blaise Pascal's paradigm of Cleopatra's nose establishes contingency and the freedom of individual actors as the Alpha and Omega of historical accomplishment. It also breaks with a more contemporary left-wing application particularly in vogue in imperial historiography: what would India have been without British colonial rule? When the question dictates the answer, there is nothing productive about the process and its benefits are purely trivial and ideological: a critique of colonialism and of Western supremacy. The chapter entitled 'Testing the Empire' demonstrates this by providing an overview of different types of counterfactual approaches in imperial history rather than by applying them. This is the first, exploratory, section of the book. The second section, focused on the 1848 February Revolution in France, offers a more targeted and applied use of counterfactual reasoning, although the results are not necessarily convincing. This is probably something about the writing and the plot creation here that prevents full use of the tool being made, but that's not important in this instance as the authors openly acknowledge the experimental nature of their approach. Others will take up the mantel.

Pasts That Are Very Much Alive

The second side to the book is almost more surprising. It uncovers a rich genealogy of the counterfactual genre (in historiography, from Thucydides to Niall Ferguson and Robert Fogel, as well as in literature). Above all, though, it introduces

¹ R. Chartier, *Les Origines culturelles de la Révolution française*, Paris, Seuil, 1989.

the reader to a cultural history of uses of the past by connecting current enthusiasm in this regard to a new sensitivity to different time periods that François Hartog has called the 'presentist' regime of historicity and that Jérôme Baschet has analysed in a fascinating new book that seeks to unpack all its implications.² It is, indeed, all too obvious that these dreams of alternative history are the products of their time: they reflect the frustrations of a present clouded by fears about the future, summoned forth and cast aside by the tyranny of immediacy in which the past is intensively recycled in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways, in the form of painful memories, participatory or recreational activities, commemorations of the past, its transformation into heritage, or its endless replaying in order to ensure that all is still to play for.

While the success of the Puy du Fou historical theme park, created in 1978 by Philippe de Villiers, is well known in France, the broader vitality and scale of historical re-enactments are less well known (or looked down upon). In the United States, Civil War 'Living History' events account for a budget of 1.4 billion dollars, twice the annual profits of Broadway (p. 287)! Counterfactual history intersects with this relationship to the past insofar as re-enactments often add new endings: battle re-enactments, for example, leave the end of the conflict open to the interpretation of the actors (whether professionals or, more often, amateur members of an association) who are free to change the script. Similarly, since the 1970s, role-playing games and video games – the foremost cultural industry in the world – have both drawn extensively on historical worlds or fictionalised historical worlds, as in the 'Heroic fantasy' genre. For example, in the famous game *Civilization*, players take the role of an emblematic leader – Moctezuma, Cesar, Napoleon, etc. – and have to lead their civilization from the Stone Age to the conquest of space. Historical experimentation and a pathological hypertrophy of the ego make for a happy marriage. Psychologists define these counterfactual games as the "'adult" version of children's games'. What clearer demonstration could there be that we are, undeniably, dealing here with a symptom of the widespread infantilism that defines our times.

And yet the book ends by reflecting on the educational uses of counterfactual history, offering an account of a workshop held in Grenoble in 2011 during which participants were asked, under the friendly but firm guidance of the two historians, to think about two alternative scenarios: first, the absence of the transatlantic slave trade, and, second, the successful escape of king Louis XVI in 1791. The result was highly productive, including for those who are not necessarily bound to take the lead when

² Jérôme Baschet, *La tyrannie du présent, Temporalités émergentes et futurs inédits*, Paris, La Découverte, 2018.

it comes to making use of new educational techniques. The participants, who all possessed a certain level of knowledge from the outset, formulated hypotheses and engaged in relevant and collective thinking out loud.

Beyond the heuristic and possibly educational value of this history of possibles, Quentin Deluermoz and Pierre Singaravélou help us to understand just how relevant this approach is to our time. By bringing out the 'possibles' which have, in part, disappeared from our range of perceptions, this history makes a contribution to an urgent task: loosening the vicelike grip of our own times, which Jérôme Baschet calls the 'tyranny of the present'. This is why, despite its imperfections and its unrealised possibilities, this is a fine history book.

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