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What If This Conference Had Not Taken Place

- **Counterfactual Thinking / Counterfactual Writing. An Interdisciplinary Conference Organised by the School of Language and Literature at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS), Sept 28th-30th 2009.**

This conference pursued an interdisciplinary approach to the concept of counterfactuality. The fields of studies represented comprised not only various branches of the humanities but also of the social and natural sciences. Hence, papers were presented from the field of philosophy, history and political science, cognitive linguistics, philosophy of science, computer science and literary studies. The conference raised an awareness of the fact that different disciplines diverge in the way they use and define counterfactual reasoning. Furthermore, counterfactual thinking turned out to be an object of study for some disciplines and a method of reasoning for others. Yet the conference also showed that – once it has been clarified *what* one is talking about – interdisciplinary exchange on counterfactuality proves useful for each individual discipline involved. Trains of thoughts started at this conference are waiting to be taken up.

The contributions by Georg Christoph Berger Waldenegg, Bernhard Kleeberg, and Ned Lebow dealt with the extent to which counterfactual reasoning functions as an epistemic tool, and thus as a method of study, in history and political science.

Georg Christoph Berger Waldenegg's paper »›What If?‹: Counterfactuality and History« analysed the epistemological problems of counterfactual historiography. He sketched main positions currently held by historians, proposed a typology of counterfactual writing in history and reported that in his discipline counterfactual thinking has been on the rise for the past 15 years, especially in case studies. However, it is certainly too early to speak of a »counterfactual turn«. He pointed out that the epistemological status of counterfactual history differs from factual history only in degree but not in kind and that from a methodological point of view there is no fundamental difference between the two approaches: both factual and counterfactual historiography look for evidence, they both use the same methodological apparatus for evaluating their sources, and they both use the very same criteria to check whether a hypothesis is plausible or not. In history, Berger Waldenegg explained, counterfactual reasoning has heuristic functions in that it allows to look at the different factors which have brought about an historical event and to determine the degree of their influence. Berger Waldenegg suggested a seven-fold taxonomy to classify the ways in which historical accounts make use of counterfactual reasoning: (1) they may employ counterfactuality in a direct or in an indirect way, accounts may be (2) more or less specified, and (3) formulated in a more cautious or in a more insistent way. (4) They may extend over a comparatively long or short period of time, be (5) more or less comprehensive, be (6) mono-causal or pluri-causal and include (7) personal or structural factors.

Bernhard Kleeberg's talk on »Retrospective Prognoses: Modelling Historical Counterfactuals« developed two theses: first, historical understanding has always been based on counterfactual reasoning, and second, counterfactual reasoning as the foundation of retrospective prognosis would not have gained its significance if there had not been the nomothetic turn in 19th-century historiography. He based his argument on an interpretation of two texts, Ernst Mach's essay *On Thought Experiments* and the passage on »Objective possibility and adequate causation in historical explanation« in Max Weber's *Critical Studies in the logic of cul-*

tural sciences. Kleeberg argued that whereas Weber uses counterfactual thinking to verify historical explanations, Mach's thought experiments provide prognoses about possible outcomes. Mach varied influences and reduced conditions one by one. This enabled him to distinguish between significant and non-significant causes. Kleeberg argued that counterfactual thought experiments provide two main advantages for historical research: first, they possess negative heuristic value in that they provide reasons and grounds for reassessing or even deconstructing reductionist historical explanations or positions that conflate genesis and validity. Second, counterfactual thought experiments help to differentiate between the actual course of events and potential alternatives and to assess the plausibility of historical reconstructions.

Ned Lebow (»Counterfactual Case Studies and Experimental Research in International Relations«) agreed with Berger Waldenegg that counterfactual reasoning has gained importance in the historical and social sciences, and he also considered the distinction between factual and counterfactual reasoning to be one of degree, not of kind. Lebow claimed that counterfactual reasoning, albeit still widely disdained, can be applied effectively both as a method and as a rhetorical device in the interplay of political sciences and psychology in order to prove causation and to uncover the intentions of agents. He claimed that counterfactual experiments could usefully be applied to show how policymakers, historians and scholars in international relations think about causation. Tests conducted along these lines exposed the cognitive and motivational reasons why, for instance, historians preferred one theory or explanation over another. The fact that people subjected to the tests could be manipulated shows that recipients of causal explanations in general may find accounts plausible even if they are not based on scientific facts. Lebow took this as an indication that counterfactual and factual story-telling are actually quite similar. According to Lebow, counterfactual reasoning applied in history can in fact lead to more precise judgements, since thinking about alternative worlds helps answer questions such as: When is causation contingent and when does contingency stop? Where are these turning points? How is it possible to assess which events are more contingent than others? Which scenarios are possible, likely, inevitable? Which are the possibilities that guide a decision-making process?

The papers by Tobias Klauk and Daniel Dohrn explored the epistemic status of fictional texts from the point of view of analytically oriented philosophy. **Tobias Klauk** (»Thought Experiments and Literature«) examined to what extent literary texts might be regarded as thought experiments, and hence if literature could be seen as a knowledge-producing enterprise. Klauk considered counterfactual reasoning to be crucial for the production and reception of literature. For him, literary analysis touches upon philosophical reasoning in two ways. First, literature may be analysed in terms of possible-worlds theory. Second, the structure of thought experiments conducted in writing or reading literature is similar to the one of thought experiments conducted in philosophy: in both philosophy and literature a counterfactual scenario is first made up and then evaluated. Any such evaluation implies questions such as: »What other implications arise from this imagined setting?«, or »What maxims for action arise from it?« But, he went on, even though fictional scenarios in literature create knowledge, philosophical thought experiments differ from counterfactual reasoning in literature in terms of their practical application.

Daniel Dohrn's talk on »Counterfactual Explanation in Literature and the Social Sciences« pointed to an important parallel between the two. Dohrn argued that the method of reasoning we employ to explain matters of fact, actions and intentions in fiction parallels the way we explain them in the actual world and in the natural sciences. Drawing on D. Lewis, he argued that a fictional text might state explicitly or implicitly how things are in a possible world, yet if a text does neither, the reader will naturally assume that the fictional world resembles the

actual world. This specifically applies to causal connections. In order to find the cause (or causes) of matters of fact, actions and intentions in the actual world, Dohrn argued, we imagine counterfactual scenarios. And in order to find the cause (or causes) of matters of fact, actions and intentions in a fictional world, we imagined counterfictional scenarios. For example, in order to find out why Ahab pursues Moby Dick, Dohrn claimed, we imagine the *counterfictional* scenario that the whale has never hurt Ahab. If that were the case, Ahab would not want to kill it. Hence we infer that Moby Dick has previously wounded Ahab.

Counterfictionality, albeit in a different sense, was also prominent in **Richard Saint-Gelais**'s talk »How to Do Things with Worlds: From Counterfactuality to Counterfictionality«. In this paper, however, it was not conceived of as an heuristic tool employed to find out about specific causes but it was defined as a fully fledged alternative related to, but different from, an already existing fictional world. Against the background of the term ›counterfactual world‹ – denoting a possible world related to, but different from, the actual world – Saint-Gelais defined the terms ›counterfiction‹ or ›counterfictional world‹. These denote an alteration of an already existing fictional world. Whereas the logical status of a counterfactual world is clear, Saint-Gelais said, the logical status of counterfictional ones is not. Counterfictionals usually display their fictional status. They can take different forms and are closely related to metafictional writing, though not all counterfictional texts are necessarily metafictional, as some merely present a (more or less plausible) version of the ›original‹.

The interdisciplinary approach and mutual exchange especially between the humanities and the sciences sought by the organisers of this conference especially came to the fore in the following four papers. They showed clearly that the two areas of human discourse are more closely connected than it is often assumed.

Michael Brenner (»›If Androids Dreamt of Electric Sheep‹: Counterfactual Reasoning in Artificial Intelligence«) explained how counterfactual reasoning is used in both the development and programming of autonomous intelligent robots. Brenner clarified that – contrary to popular conceptions – current research in artificial intelligence does not seek to build machines that are as intelligent as or even more intelligent than human beings. Rather, it seeks to develop and build agents that possess either of the following qualities: (1) they are able to perceive, to act and to solve problems that would require intelligence when performed by humans, or (2) they are intelligent in such a way that they are able to create coherent, plausible, believable and interesting stories. Whereas, Brenner explained, the former kind of artificially intelligent agent (AI agent) is more universally applicable, the latter is obviously more interesting to the game industry. In neither case is the notion of ›intelligence‹ defined sufficiently in any way. It is important to realize, Brenner emphasised, that for an AI agent »the world« is whatever facts it has been fed. This world need not be the same as the one inhabited by the person who programmes the AI agent. Hence, counterfacts are always relative to the world construed for a specific AI agent. In programming AI agents (predominantly of the first, but also of the second type), both counterfactual reasoning and possible-worlds semantics come in. They are used to teach the AI agent to »think« (»My owner wants x. If I had y, I could get him x, if I had z, I could get y…«), to make the AI agent learn from experiences it has not yet had, or to help identify the cause for erroneous behaviour of the AI agent.

Martin Hilpert's talk on »The Cognitive Linguistics of Counterfactuals« set off with an extensive introduction into premises, research goals and findings of cognitive linguistics *per se*, with a special emphasis on the concepts of blending, frame semantics and the theory of conceptual integration networks. Against this background, he was then able to explain that (1) conceptual integration, the mental processing that underlies both the construction and the un-

derstanding of counterfactuals, also underlies the mental processing of many other utterances, and (2) that, other than generally assumed, counterfactual thinking is neither rare nor marked in language by only a few grammatical forms (»if…, then...«). Rather, it also underlies thought expressed by negation, modality, causation, clause linkage, compounding, attributive constructions, and certain lexical items. Hilpert suggested that further research be done on the kind of frames used as inputs for counterfactual thought, on the correspondences which exist across those frames, on the kinds of correspondences compressed, on the kind of blends that result and on their emergent structures.

Karl Christoph Klauer (»If Only: Psychological Research on Counterfactual Processing«) gave an overview of the area of psychological research on counterfactual thinking. Like Hilpert, he also stressed that such thought processes are part of our everyday experience. Within the field of psychology, »counterfactual thinking« is used to refer to a set of cognitions involving the simulation of alternatives to past or present factual events or circumstances. As such, it can be directed upward or downward, with upward counterfactual reasoning imagining a situation better than the factual one, and downward counterfactual reasoning imagining a situation worse than the factual one. Psychological research focuses on the question of what triggers counterfactual thinking and what its functions are, which factual events are changed and how this is done, on the relation to perceptions of causality and on the emotional outcomes of such thinking. Counterfactual reasoning presupposes that there is an alternative, that for every exceptional event there is a usual one (the reference norm), and that actions imply the alternative of not to act. They also imply the validity of social constructs such as obligations, stereotypes and prejudice. As for triggers, negative events and bare misses are most prominent, yet positive outcomes also give rise to counterfactual reasoning. Counterfactual reasoning is closely linked to causal reasoning in which the antecedent condition is clearly perceived as causally responsible for the outcome (»if only I had taken the usual way home, I would not have had an accident«). Upward counterfactual thinking enhances negative emotional reactions such as regret, guilt, despair (»I could have won gold, but I only got silver«), whereas downward counterfactual thinking enhances emotional reactions such as pride and relief (»Brilliant I got bronze, I might not have won a medal at all«). On the whole, counterfactual reasoning serves (or rather: seeks) to bring about a positive outcome or to avoid a negative outcome in the future, to mentally escape negative effects such as anger or depression, and to make one believe one is in control of the situation.

Patrizia Catellani (»Counterfactuals in the Social Context: The Case of Political Interviews and Their Effects«) dealt with the public and popular use of counterfactual reasoning conducted by politicians and its effect on the voters. The research she reported on is focused on present-day Italian politics and it is predominantly based on transcripts of TV programmes. It started from the observation that present-day Italian politicians use counterfactuals extensively to present their views and strategies, to defend themselves, to attack their opponents and to console the electorate (»things could be much worse if…«). According to Catellani, evoking counterfactuals serves the following aims: it influences the explanation of events and the attribution of responsibility, it suggests controllability, and it enhances the validity of a presumed, shared reference norm, usually a stereotyped social norm or a stereotyped ›usual‹ behaviour. As for the effect, Catellani found out that the way a politician is evaluated by voters depends on the direction of the counterfactual employed: politicians are evaluated better the more downward counterfactuals they employ (»If I hadn't…, things would be much worse«). Voters' evaluation is based on the factors of energy, competence and worth (i.e.: moral integrity).

Jan Alber and Robyn Warhol-Down introduced the conference participants to narratological perspectives on counterfactuals in literature. Whereas Jan Alber dealt with the interrelation of real and fictional world, Robyn Warhol-Down scrutinised counterfactuals within the fictional world, i.e. as a text-immanent phenomenon brought about through language.

Jan Alber (»Impossible Storyworlds: An Extreme Case of Counterfactuality«) introduced the audience to the genre »unnatural narrative« as a subcategory of counterfactual narratives. Whereas for Jan Alber all fictional narratives are *per se* counterfactual, »unnatural narratives« in particular present scenarios that are physically or logically impossible; unavoidably, they create an estranging effect (Shklovsky). They differ from other counterfactual narratives in their degree of departure from the actual world to which they can no longer be directly related. Nevertheless, the aesthetic effect of these disconcerting story-worlds rests with the way in which they throw light on the individual, on the actual world and on the way it is perceived. On the basis of three postmodernist texts Alber then exemplified three cognitive routes, which, he argued, readers follow when faced with unnatural narratives: (1) readers might try to grasp the unnatural scenario as a blend of two scenarios which they are familiar with from their experience of the actual world, i.e. they activate the knowledge of two pre-existing »natural« frames. Alternatively, (2) readers might try to understand the unnatural described in the text as an allegory for the actual world, or (3) they might employ what Alber calls »script enrichment« or »frame adjustment«, involving several cognitive steps. This strategy, Alber explained, requires the reader to be ready to stretch pre-existing frames far beyond actual world possibilities until they include the unnatural scenario. According to Alber, examining the cognition of unnatural scenarios in literary texts which depart largely from the actual world can shed light on how we create sense and meaning in general.

In her paper »Dickens's Narrative Refusals« **Robyn Warhol-Down** gave an insight into her current research project. Warhol-Down holds the opinion that counterfactuality applies to all literature and is therefore useless as a category for distinguishing between different kinds of literary texts. Instead, she employs it as a criterion to be employed within the fictional world. For her, the narration of the counterfactual within the story-world functions as a tool to allude to elements within the story-world which are unnarratable for various reasons. In her analysis of narrative refusals and narrative gestures in novels by Charles Dickens she introduced the following typology to differentiate between various instances of the »unnarratable«: (1) the »subnarratable«: that which need not be told because it is too obvious or boring; (2) the »supranarratable«: that which cannot be told because it is ineffable or inexpressible; (3) the »antinarratable«: that which should not be told because of trauma or taboo; (4) the »paranarratable«: that which is not told because of literary convention. To describe the paradoxical *process* of narrating the »unnarratable« she distinguishes between (1) »unnarration«: when the narrator indicates her inability or unwillingness to tell what happened; this can be done in a sentimental or comical way; (2) »disnarration«, when the narrator tells something that did not happen, in place of saying what actually did happen. Language characteristic of this kind of the »unnarratable« are negations and subjunctives. »Disnarration« can take (a) a nostalgic tone, suggesting that something was there once, but is there so no longer, (b) a hopeful tone: something might be there, but is not yet, and (c) a despairing tone: something never has been and never will be there.

Whereas Jan Alber and Robyn Warhol-Down work on establishing typologies for narratological analysis, the following three contributions showed how the notion of counterfactuality can be applied to three different genres, the counterfactual historical novel (A. Widmann), writing that features time-travel (R. Heinze), and feminist utopian writing (B. Christ).

In his paper »Plot vs. Story: Towards a Typology of Counterfactual Historical Novels«, **Andreas M. Widmann** discussed the specific characteristics of counterfactual historical novels in relation to a) fictional representations of history that do not deviate from (the agreed interpretation of what counts as) fact, b) historiography which tries to stick as closely as possible to ›fact‹ yet which, as not only post-structuralism has pointed out, cannot do without fictional elements, and, c) historiography which accidentally deviates from fact (Widmann: a flaw) or which does so purposefully, yet tries to disguise that it does so (Widmann: a lie). According to Widmann, current definitions and current terminology available for counterfactual historical novels rely too much on the idea that these novels describe what the world would be like if certain events or decisions had been different. However, Widmann argued that as not all novels use that pattern, a different typology is required. In order to arrive at such a different typology, he made use of E.M. Forster's distinction between story and plot. This allowed him to distinguish between two types of counterfactual historical novels. Both types, each in their way, challenge the predominant interpretation of historical events and draw attention to chance and necessity. Yet whereas the first type does so by changing the plot of the actual historical events and leaving the story unchanged (e.g. Th. Brussig's *Helden wie wir*), the second type (e.g. Ch. Kracht's *Ich werde hier sein im Sonnenschein und im Schatten*) changes the story and hence parts, but not necessarily all, of the plot.

In his paper »›A Sound of Thunder‹. Time Travel, Possible Worlds and Counterfactuality«, **Rüdiger Heinze** discussed counterfactuality within literary texts or films, not in the relation between reality and fiction. He started with a working definition of the function of counterfactuality: it makes us aware of what we would otherwise not see. He then looked at films and literary texts featuring time-travel, which by their very nature present counterfactual scenarios. He first focused on the conception of time-travel, the way it is brought about and the effects it has on the characters, on the concept of time involved and on the world and time travelled to. Second, he discussed to what extent time-travel could be conceived as a thought experiment, which cultural functions it may have, which ideological investments may be involved, and whether the stories which feature time-travel are coherent and consistent or not. Heinze concluded that there is a vast number of time-travel fiction, which roughly falls into two categories: the first kind assumes an orderly, controllable world, the second assumes an unpredictable world out of control. Both, in their way, tend to challenge the notion of human free will.

In her paper entitled »›If I Were A Man‹: The Counterfactual as Feminist Analytic«, **Birte Christ** looked at four narratives of feminist utopian writing, two each from the first and from the second wave of feminism. She identified the utopian world created in these texts as feminist utopian counterfactual realities which, so she showed, come in two types. The first type, exemplified by Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1914) and S. Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground* (1979), describes a counterfactual society, a world that revises the hierarchy of the gender-binary and places women on top of all hierarchies. The second type, exemplified by Perkins Gilman's *If I were a Man* (1914) and Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), creates an alternative identity for its protagonist beyond the gender-binary. As Christ explained, the two types of fictions function differently. Whereas the first one relies on a contrastive effect which helps criticise social practices in the actual world, the second type draws attention to the causal connection between a person's gender and how they are treated. By so doing, she argued, it denaturalizes the institutionalised rules that govern gendered social relations and it reveals how the factual system is based on a hierarchically conceived gender contrast. Both types, each in their way, make an alternative to the actual available and conceivable and help the reader see the actual with different eyes.

The concluding discussion reviewed the results of the conference and pointed towards desiderata for further research. Participants noted that the conference had enabled them to realise that different disciplines did not work with the same definition of counterfactuality. This also applied to neighbouring terms from which they distinguished counterfactuality. Trying to understand what another discipline meant by the very term proved helpful for one's own endeavour. Especially, it enabled one to make finer distinctions and to explore the relation between the counterfactual, the counterfictional and the hypothetical as well as the relation between the factual and the fictional. It was agreed that this conference had introduced different disciplines to each other in respect of what each of them ›did‹ with counterfactual thinking and writing, and that it was now both possible and necessary to treat matters in greater detail.

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