

Reflections on the Analysis of Counterfactual Propositions and Alternative History Speculative Fiction about WWI

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*“Chaque seconde, dans l’infiniment grand, dans l’infiniment petit,
dans l’infiniment lointain, il y a peut-être un univers qui naît
comme le nôtre est né”*²

(Bernard Werber: *Les Fourmis*. Albin Michel S.A.: Paris, 1991, p. 52)

*“I don't know any [works of alternative history fiction about WWI]. Probably because WWI is always
overshadowed by WW2 – and before WW2 the Great War was too horrible in the mind of the people that
they'd make AH [alternative history] about it, I'd say.”*

(Banned user “Max Sinister”, commenting on why he is not aware of any piece of alternative history
speculative fiction about WWI, on a forum hosted at alternatetheory.com.)

Abstract

This article offers a brief overview of the challenges of assessing counterfactual statements in terms of plausibility, to then consider the reasons for the comparative scarcity of WWI alternative histories in published alternative history (AH) speculative fiction. The relative rarity of such fiction may be striking, given the popularity of the notion that the event of the nearly-botched assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir presumptive to the throne of Austria-Hungary, in 1914, in Sarajevo — in a sense a small, improbable event — was the decisive trigger of the conflict. Explaining the comparative lack of AH in the light of a systematic understanding of the difficulties of counterfactual analysis may be as interesting for literary theory as to political analysis. The article closes with a discussion of the few relevant pieces of genre literature that have been identified during the course of the research for this piece.

Keywords: alternative history, speculative fiction, counterfactuals, counterfactual analysis, World War I

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² „Every second there may be a new universe born in the worlds of the infinitely big, the infinitely small and the infinitely distant, just like ours was once born.” (P.M., own translation)

Introduction: The various kinds of counterfactual analysis and their combination

Whatever some historians say, addressing the plausibility of propositions in response to “What if?” type questions is intrinsic to thinking about politics and strategy, be this addressed explicitly or only implicitly. Every explanation rests on assumptions of what could have happened differently if we alter something in the past course of events, and every prediction rests on assumptions of what the preconditions for a valid prediction are, in the absence of which something else might come to happen. For instance: Was the assassination of Franz Ferdinand a necessary and sufficient condition for WWI, or was it merely sufficient (so that other triggers might have set off a similar conflict in its absence)? Should Franz Ferdinand have survived, were his views really such that the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy may have avoided a disastrous war under his influence? These complex and complicated questions can be unpacked from the seemingly more simple questions of “What was the reason for WWI?” and “What were Franz Ferdinand’s views of the future of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy?”

Various established approaches to counterfactual analysis exist in the political sciences literature. This paper considers the most important difference between these approaches their divergence in terms of their respective epistemological and ontological positions – a difference that shall be better illuminated below. In particular, this article shall refer to four important sources in detail in this introductory discussion: Sylvan and Majeski, 1998; Lebow, 2010; Harvey, 2012; and Hendrickson, 2012.

Sylvan and Majeski’s work is fairly unique in an epistemological sense in that it is looking to make hard counterfactual statements (*if this → then that*) whereas Lebow doubts if truly “robust” (i.e. definitively pronounced) counterfactuals can ever be made. In line with Lebow’s approach, Harvey is satisfied by posing a sufficiently strong challenge to dominant but in fact weak counterfactual assumptions that are present in public thinking, by the systemic and comprehensive collection of evidence – comprehensive in the sense of accounting for all possible variations of counterfactual statements regarding a certain event (*if this, then → this, under certain conditions OR that, under other, alternative conditions*). Upon the consideration of these three sources, Hendrickson’s propositions regarding “antecedent scenarios” shall also be considered here, to integrate the different approaches into a pragmatic doctrine of comprehensive counterfactual analysis.

In a nutshell, Sylvan and Majeski (1998) focus not so much on the plausibility (or relative possibility) of a given alternative reality or “possible world”, or in other words

on the “miracle” or change that it would take to lead to said alternative reality. Rather, they are interested in ontological consistency. In other words: theirs is an essentialist approach interested in determining the *necessary* as well as the *contingent* qualities of key analytical units or “entities” in any given world. This necessitates the identification of “essence”, so that given entities be the *same* across different possible worlds. This is opposed to a “cluster” notion of identity whereby entities would have only closely or less resembling “counterparts,” as opposed to fully identical pairs, across various worlds. Were we to take the latter approach we could not “rigidly designate” entities by any name valid across different possible worlds, as in any different possible world no truly fully matching entity could be found, and thus all-encompassing truth claims could not be made concerning counterparts (and, per consequence, counterfactuals). Certain traits in the cluster or constellation of various qualities that define an entity thus need to be *necessary* (and specified as such) for us to engage in meaningful analysis. Some of these traits will be monadic, i.e., stand-alone traits, but they may also be *n*-adic (dyadic, triadic etc.), i.e., a quality emerging from the combination of two or more specific monadic traits.

Sylvan and Majeski use this approach in the study of abstract, socially constructed entities such as “policy recommendations,” of potential interest to us in looking at decision alternatives in different contexts, as is the case with many counterfactuals put forward regarding WWI (Sylvan and Majeski, 1998: 80-86). Sylvan and Majeski are interested in identifying what policy recommendations (qualifying as such as a result of having the essential traits of “policy recommendation”) may be “winnable” (a contingent property) in a given historical context. Such contingent properties should, in their approach, be deduced on the basis of a conception of essential, i.e. constitutive relations between contingent properties. In other words, with sufficient information about both essence and contingent properties, one may draw conclusions regarding even unknown contingent properties (1998: 88-89). Winnability can thus be gauged according to our understanding of the mix of essential and contingent properties across various different possible worlds, and how they interrelate with one another.

Importantly, this approach “brackets” antecedent and succeeding sections of causal chains and is only looking to define the constitutive relations between phenomena across various stipulated possible worlds at a given point along the event horizon, without regard to the likelihood (the relative possibility) of their coming about from a set of necessary conditions (1998: 89-90). It is interested in “comparability” rather than relative possibility, and comparability stems from the presence of certain essentially identical

phenomena across different stipulated worlds in co-temporaneous snapshots of such parallelly possible realities.

In this way, Sylvan and Majeski's approach to the study of policy recommendations may function as an important test of counterfactual propositions regarding, e.g., decision alternatives: by showing what alternative, non-implemented policy options ought to be considered as especially relevant counterfactuals in the first place, from the point of view of "winnability." This may be relevant in what-if scenarios for "same-government" as well as "different-government" possible worlds.³

Harvey (2012: 27-37) outlines a different approach which may complement the one outlined by Sylvan and Majeski in eventual policy analysis, especially if used in conjunction with Hendrickson's work (2012; to be discussed below). Harvey uses a very neat and parsimonious plausibility test of counterfactual propositions in the form of a two-by-two matrix of interconnected counterfactuals, or two pairs of such statements, whereby the pairs differ in terms of a supposedly essential property, while the members of each pair relate to each other as mutually exclusive assumptions. In other words, instead of the "if B (instead of A) \rightarrow then D (instead of C)" proposition of a typical counterfactual statement, we should be interested in looking at a set of propositions along the logic of "either A, or B"; "if A \rightarrow then C or D"; "if B \rightarrow then C or D."

Such a set of assumptions may be seen as logically stemming from any historical causal thesis, and the one put forward will in effect be but one of four different statements from the matrix mentioned above; hence the need for unbiased, open-ended testing. In line with this, evidence then needs to be collected, and upon "a careful (and complete) review of the relevant historical record," one needs to decide "Which [of the four mutually exclusive options] receives the strongest support" (Harvey, 2012: 27). Two of the most important benefits of this method highlighted by Harvey are simplicity or parsimony, and utility for various different disciplines interested in investigating causation with their own theories and conceptual repertoire. There is simplicity in this, as any evidence serving as the strength of one explanation in either of the pairs of mutually exclusive counterfactuals is by default proof against the other member of the same pair. Utility for various

³ Sylvan and Majeski propose a very elaborate doctrine for such analysis that builds on a peculiar, rigid (albeit not altogether unrealistic) notion of decision-making (with specific regard to U.S. foreign policy decision-making) as well as on a set of assumptions regarding *when* new policy recommendations can come forward (when current policy fails according to given criteria) and *how* a policy recommendation can kill its competing alternatives (according to what criteria). This paper is interested less in developing an alternative doctrine of this kind or in utilizing theirs, and more in demonstrating how a pragmatic approach can combine some of the elements from this kind of analysis with other approaches.

disciplines on the other hand is a product of the careful process-tracing required in investigating causation, whereby detailed case histories and outlines of the most important (and generalizable) causal mechanisms may emerge, tested as to whether they conform to existing theoretical understandings of the processes concerned (Harvey, 2012: 34-36). In essence, this is the approach proposed by Lebow as well (2012).

Harvey designed his approach for the purposes of examining a “Gore/War counterfactual” in the context of the events of 2003 and U.S. military action against Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq, in terms of plausibility, in the face of what he calls the “Neoconist” account of the Iraq war which tends to emphasize the role of neoconservative ideological influences and President George W. Bush’s assumed personality traits as the chief factors explaining why the Iraq war took place.

Different-government counterfactuals are relevant in the case of other countries as well, not only with regards to the U.S., in the context of the war in Iraq (as well as in other contexts). In a cascade of if/then propositions similar to Neoconist arguments, Dyson (2006, 2007) concludes that Tony Blair made a decisive difference as to British policy, especially in terms of the nature and size of the British contribution to the Iraq war, whereas the Central-Eastern European (CEE) version of the argument, in Mikulova’s thesis (2011), is that a network of “Atlanticist” politicians and public figures made the participation of CEE countries in the Iraq war possible. These thus seem to be versions of the “Neoconist” interpretation in an analogical sense, be they valid or not – with PM Tony Blair pulling the United Kingdom into one particular possible world in the first, and with Atlanticists functioning as substitutes for the neoconservatives in the case of Central/Eastern European countries as the key decision-shapers.

Harvey makes a powerful case against such simplifying accounts in the case of the U.S. as he points out that the mainstream counterfactual of “No Bush → No War” does not address the possibility of a different administration (in this case, the Al Gore administration) going to war. In Harvey’s final assessment, this may almost certainly be a mistake with regards to an Al Gore administration which may well have decided in favor of military action. Harvey demonstrates this point with an extensive set of quotes from speeches and other texts, carefully sourced and contextualized, that reflect and document Al Gore’s, as well as some of his most likely advisors’, hawkish leanings, along with their specific preferences on Iraq policy in favor of coercive diplomacy. A Gore administration’s policy may, thus, have led, albeit along a different causal path, to war, through the UN, just as the Bush administration decided to proceed initially. To quote but

one source taking a similar view, not cited by Harvey himself: “The most hawkish Democrats, since the 1990s, had essentially embraced conservative internationalism, rather than offering something very different” (Zelizer, 2010: 449).

To nevertheless offer a more refined assessment here: Georgia Senator Max Cleland, as surely many may have felt at the time, explained this stance of many Democrats with reference to the constraints of electoral politics on the eve of the 2002 elections to the Senate, and said that in his view he would have been “dead meat in the race” if he would not have taken a sufficiently tough stance on Iraq (Zelizer, 2010: 463).

This clearly pertains to the issue of “winnability” raised by Sylvan and Majeski. But the sources of *some* Democrats’ actions (acting under constraints rather than very eagerly, out of a genuine personal conviction) may not make much of a difference in the end, in terms of what is key to the counterfactual of a Gore administration directing the same more skeptical Democrats out of their own quite strong conviction of the need to remove Saddam Hussein from power. Zelizer is careful to note that “the yea vote [authorizing the President to use force against Iraq] was larger than the one for the elder Bush’s operation in 1991 [authorizing the use of force to liberate Kuwait]” (Zelizer, 2010: 463).

Harvey’s approach is interesting in that it sets out to do what Sylvan and Majeski do in a different way as well. Both Harvey and Sylvan and Majeski use an approach that well reflects Lebow’s warning that our world may not be the most probable of all possible worlds. Sylvan and Majeski, by considering parameters of winnability in the case of foreign policy recommendations, ask questions about how even the same government may have acted differently, and implicitly they offer a way to assess how a different government may have acted differently (or in the same way), thus accounting for all of Harvey’s variations; in essence, this is entirely compatible with what Harvey’s matrix sets out as the right approach to counterfactual analysis.

Adapting Sylvan and Majeski’s as well Harvey’s approach in a pragmatic combination, willfully disregarding some of their epistemological and ontological incompatibilities, one may develop an integrated approach to assess both what different things may have been regarded at the time as viable or winnable policy options by any government (including the same government), as well as whether different governments may have done different things. Thus one establishes “internal” plausibility conditions for alternative possible worlds, within which an innermost circle is to be differentiated as well. The innermost plausibility conditions are those that pertain to the preferences or

winnability criteria specific to a certain government (“specific preferences”), whilst the outer layer of internal plausibility conditions are those that pertain to the winnability parameters inherent in the decision-making situation, i.e. in the structural constraints or the opportunity structure of the situation (“structural constraints”).

Such an approach works especially if, in addition, it takes note of the importance of “antecedent scenario” development, which Hendrickson suggests should be included in any truly thorough counterfactual analysis (2012).

To some degree, the burden of the invention of plausible antecedent scenarios may be placed on those who subscribe to the thesis that the same government may have done different things or that different leaders would or could have implemented different policies. In examining counterfactual propositions, one needs to consider the plausibility of the antecedent events they imply, to appreciate the relative significance of different such propositions. Thus, one can establish the “external” plausibility conditions of alternative possible worlds.

With this, pragmatic counterfactual analysis now has three different layers of plausibility conditions to inquire about, at decreasing levels of absolute plausibility, as portrayed in the scheme below. These all pertain to the assessment of plausible alternative outcomes along the lines of four fundamentally different scenarios, denoted with the numbers 0, 1, 2, and 3, respectively, in *Figure 1*. The “zero counterfactual” is what Lebow, Sylvan and Majeski, and Harvey all draw attention to, namely that under certain conditions different decisions may have been possible by the same government – the world of the actual decision is not the only possible world and not necessarily the most probable world.

Thus, even without antecedent changes, decision-making could have produced different results, within the innermost plausibility conditions. The other three scenarios all require what are, in principle, increasingly implausible antecedent scenarios to offer plausible outcomes (increasingly implausible given that more/bigger changes are required by them).

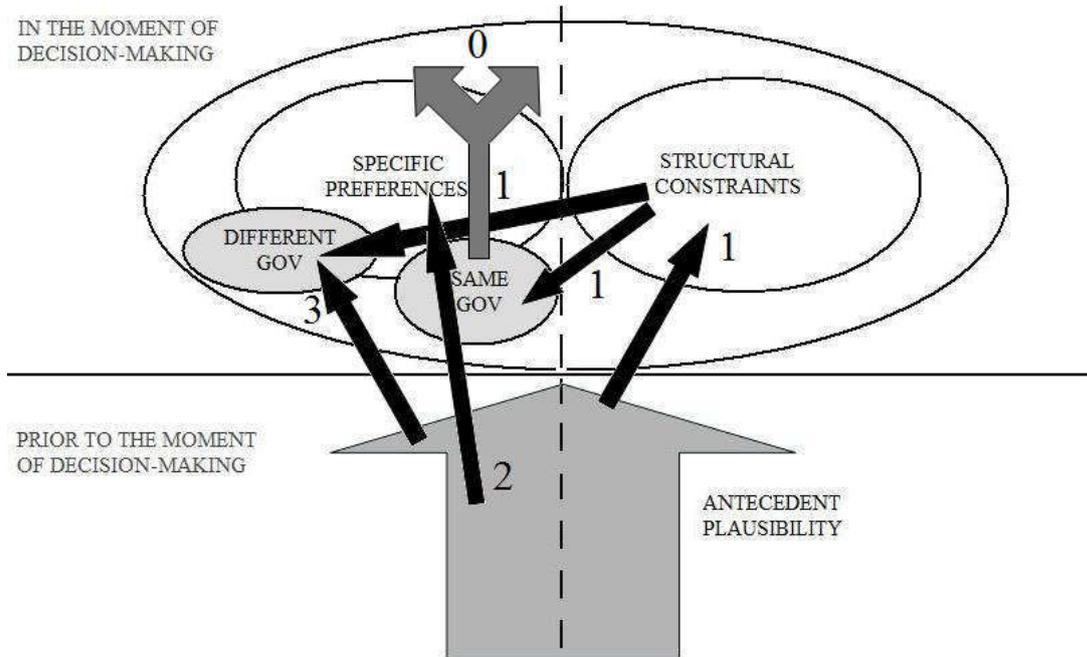


Figure 1: Counterfactual scenarios: (0) Same government comes to different decision; (1) Structural winnability parameters are altered (*causing change in structural constraints, thus causing possibly different decision by same as well as different government*); (2) Actor-specific winnability parameters are altered (*causing different decision by the same government*); (3) Actor is altered (*causing different government, with different specific preferences*).

In the case of same-government counterfactuals, analysis would need to show how “winnability” may have come to be differently assessed by those involved in decision-making within the boundary parameters determined by internal plausibility conditions (specific preferences + structural constraints).

In the case of different-government counterfactuals, one would need to assess, beyond how specific preferences and structural constraints may have affected that government’s decision, the question of how the alternative leaders may have come to power, as a result of what intervention in the original course of events, within the boundary parameters determined by external plausibility conditions. Most frequently, in the analysis of leadership in democratic polities, this would entail an explanation of how elections could have seen the people concerned come to power, instead of the actual government of the day. More often than not, in terms of Hendrickson’s paradigm, this would mean either an unusually large amount of small, localized miracles in the form of a mass of individual voters deciding differently, when casting their ballots, or an

explanation specifying a major event intervening before the elections to cause such changes of mind on the part of said critical mass of voters.

Antecedent scenarios also have to be addressed in considering how “intermediate states,” i.e. everything that would or could have happened in-between an implied antecedent, e.g. the coming to power of alternative leaders, and the posited resulting outcomes, e.g. decisions related to the Iraq war, could have affected policy. This is especially important if one is interested in several different counterfactual propositions related to different points in time altogether, related to which plausibility values have to be re-considered with the entry of each new counterfactual element, according to the rules of Bayesian updating. For instance, it may be implausible, in a given context, to argue that some of the same important events that government A would have experienced would not have affected government B in acting out its inherently different preferences in terms of policies implemented.

To connect the above discussion once again to the analysis of WWI: counterfactual propositions about WWI abound, including counterfactual antecedent scenarios. For instance, consider the example of Spellberg’s proposition (in effect, a “different-decisions” counterfactual proposition) that avoiding Clausewitz’s untimely death due to cholera in 1831 may have resulted in a more extensive revision (basically, a more consistent revision) by him of his *On War*, limiting the popularity after his death of the notion of absolute war and the idea of the need to seek decisive engagement with enemy forces – thus possibly leading to a WWI fought very differently (2005: 111; taking this argument partly from Liddell Hart’s *Strategy*).

The relative shortage of alternative history speculative fiction about WWI

One popular book on the subject, a piece of non-fiction, edited by Tsouras and Jones (2014) outlines various “alternate histories” of WWI based on the following propositions:

“How would the war have changed had the Germans not attacked France but turned their main thrust against Russia; had the Greeks joined the allies at Gallipoli; or had the British severed the communications of the Ottoman Empire at Alexandretta? What if there was a more decisive outcome at Jutland; if the alternative plans for the Battle of the Somme in 1916 had been put into effect; or if the Americans intervened in 1915, rather 1917?” (From the publisher’s description of the book.)

As this example of a piece of work on the subject may show, there is a considerable record of thought about the many possible points of divergence along the event horizon of WWI.

Stemming from these, different events could have followed along different causal paths during WWI. It may be worth noting with a view to the previous sections of this article that most of the above scenarios can be categorised as “same-government/different-decision” scenarios, even as they may feature different/alternate generals/military commanders in the military decision-making. Opening the door to “different-government” counterfactuals and counterfactual antecedent scenarios can only add to the diversity of deviations imaginable.

A cursory glance at Wikipedia’s list of “alternate history fiction” — at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_alternate_history_fiction — reveals the far greater relative availability of WWII alternative history fiction compared to what the genre has to offer about WWI. A search for key terms confirms this: 50 hits for “world war II”, compared to just 4 for “world war I” (as of 28 September 2019). Uchronia.net, a major resource for fans of alternative histories, lists 75 relevant items with points of divergence during the period of 1914 to 1918 (as of 28 September 2019), including pieces of non-fiction (analytical-speculative works, including scholarly works), in its “Divergence Chronology” at <http://www.uchronia.net/bib.cgi/diverge.html>. In the meantime, there are 342 works listed there for the period of 1939 to 1945.

We can only speculate about the reasons for this. As internet user “Max Sinister” alludes to this in what is quoted in the motto for this article, WWI is part of WWII’s antecedent scenario, and any alternative history fiction produced post-WWII about WWI would have to, inevitably, touch upon the subject of how WWII is affected by it (“What WWII, again?”). This is a potentially complicated undertaking – it is not against the nature of alternative history fiction in general to take on a challenge like this, but it is a challenge nonetheless. Re-writing WWII is also problematic, somewhat, in an ethical sense, given how the losses of WWII affected nearly everyone around the world in one way or another, and that investing emotionally in such a story may thus be overly demanding to some readers (an argument that may be important from the perspective of an author’s quest for popularity as well as that of a publisher’s marketing).

Further, WWII offers a much clearer moral set-up of good vs. evil — a strong consensus on who was on the right and the wrong side of history, respectively. Universal human rights, declared, as we now take them for granted, after WWII, constitute a universal benchmark against which deeds of the combatant parties can be measured, and it fairly and squarely places Nazi Germany in the antagonist’s role in all works of fiction (apart from revisionist and outright Fascist propaganda that only masquerades as fiction).

For WWI, meanwhile, a typical narrative, a narrative denying that the parties involved would have had real agency as such in bringing the conflict about, and which exerts its influence up to this day, is the tale of “sliding into war”, or “slithering” over the brink into “the cauldron of war” as British Prime Minister David Lloyd George once said — even though this does not really stand up to closer scrutiny (Hamilton and Herwig, 2004: 232).

Finally, to be able to speak about the complexity of the events of WWI in the form of alternative history speculative fiction, a requirement is not only that there be creative and inventive enough authors but that there be a mature readership as well: one that can appreciate historical nuance examined from a more or less neutral perspective — a necessary trait of high-quality speculative fiction about alternative histories. Naturally, this condition is harder to meet in societies where collective memory is, to this day, not at peace with the outcome of WWI.

An overview of English-language works of alternative history speculative fiction about WWI

Based on a reasonable (and partly crowd-sourced) effort to compile an initial list of relevant works for exploration, the following items have been identified which could be obtained or regarding which sufficient information was found, for the overview below:

- Kurt Busiek and Carlos Pacheco: *Arrowsmith* (series of comics published as a book by Wildstorm, 2004, ISBN-13: 978-1401202996)
- Jon Courtenay Grimwood: *Arabesk* (“Pashazade”, “Effendi”, “Felaheen”); a trilogy of novels published from 2001 to 2003, available in a single volume from Gollancz)
- William Sanders: *The Wild Blue and the Gray* (Grand Central, 1991, ISBN-13: 978-0446361422; novel)
- Robert Egerton Swartwout: *It Might Have Happened* (W Heffer & Sons, 1934)
- Harry Turtledove: *Uncle Alf* (in: *Alternate Generals II*, anthology, Baen, 2002; short story)
- Harry Turtledove: *The Great War* (“American Front”; “Walk in Hell”, “Breakthroughs”); a trilogy of novels re-published by Del Ray, 2006)

- Scott Westerfield: *Leviathan* (Simon Pulse, 2010, ISBN-13: 9781416971740; an illustrated novel)

It may be important to note that there are other relevant works that are based on a point of divergence before (in some cases, long before) WWI, causing an alteration of the character and causal chain of WWI (if and to the extent that it happens at all). Such is, for example, Kim Stanley Robinsons' *The Years of Rice and Salt* (Bantam Books, 2002). There are also non-English works of this kind, such as *A szivarhajó utolsó útja: Fejezetek a Duna-menti Köztársaság történetéből* by Bence Pintér and Máté Pintér (Agave, Budapest, 2012, ISBN: 9786155049941). Such works are, however, not considered here in detail, with a view to WWI being outside their central focus. A further issue of delineation is that only pieces of fiction that have a clear point of divergence, i.e., a turn of events leading to alternative outcomes (along with open-ended alternative historical event horizons), may count as alternative history fiction, at least for our purposes here: otherwise any piece of fiction taking place in WWI (if its causal chain is bracketed by actual events) could be of relevance. Time-machine and parallel-reality-traveling stories have also been excluded from the inquiry.

Of the above-listed, Scott Westerfield's *Leviathan* and Kurt Busiek's *Arrowsmith* (an illustrated novel and a comic book, respectively) use a lot of fantasy elements, moving (far) away from a down-to-earth narrative's generally greater interest in plausibility, even as they capture certain societal, economic and political dynamics rather well. One features the mechanized forces of the "Clankers" (the Central Powers in our universe) against the "Darwinist" forces (the Entente Powers) that have mastered biological warfare as a result of a massive revolution in biotechnology and are thus relying on the power of engineered organisms. The other depicts a world of magic and spells, where the Allies face off with the Prussians, and dragons, ogres, vampires and other monsters add to the ranks of the combatant parties. The protagonist, Fletcher Arrowsmith (notably, carrying a *nom de guerre* by birth), joins the war in a world in the process of being reshaped by commercial wizardry, thus reflecting by analogy the spread of technology (as Arthur Clarke famously observed: advanced technology is practically indistinguishable from magic) and the expansion of capitalism.

Robert Egerton Swartwout's *It Might Have Happened: A sketch of the later career of Rupert Lister Audenard, First Earl of Slype, etc.* (from 1934) is built on a complex antecedent scenario, where Lord Randolph Churchill (1849-1895), Winston Churchill's

father, does not die an untimely death but fulfils his potential (attributed to him by many of his contemporaries, a key piece of information in terms of plausibility) to become a central figure in British politics. Swartwout uses a pseudonym for Lord Randolph Churchill, but the similarities speak for themselves. Beyond these similarities, the story leads to a very different universe, with WWI cut short, peace and stability resulting, and Hitler, consequently, not coming to power in Germany.

The U.S. Civil War is a source of points of divergence with direct relevance for WWI, both for William Sanders in the novel *The Wild Blue and the Gray* and for Harry Turtledove in his *The Great War* trilogy. The former presents a universe where the lands of what we know as the United States of America are divided between three different parties, the Union States, the Confederate States of America (CSA) and the Five Civilized Tribes – the latter two are allies, with a Cherokee protagonist joining the CSA's ranks on the French front in the story. Turtledove's series pits the United States of America, the losing party in the Civil War, against the CSA on the side of the European powers, whose conflict pulls them into the war, with the USA allied to Germany and Austria-Hungary, and the CSA as an ally of the United Kingdom and France.

In the meantime, featuring intra-WWI points of divergence, Jon Courtenay Grimwood's *Arabesk* trilogy sees WWI cut short by a peace agreement brokered by President Wilson, with the combat limited mostly to the Balkans. Even more interestingly, the scene for the story is a liberal Ottoman North Africa, addressing the counterfactual of what would have been the fate of the Ottoman Empire in the absence of a drawn-out WWI.

Last but not least, Harry Turtledove's brilliant short story, *Uncle Alf*, builds on the premise of a better-constructed German offensive in the West, resulting in the long-lasting occupation of France, where the German occupiers are gradually but surely undergoing acculturation to French norms, resisted only by die-hard purists such as the rather scary anti-hero of the story.

As these examples may demonstrate, authors of speculative fiction are creative and inventive enough to be able to come up with various scenarios for diverse points of divergence, including antecedent as well as intra-WWI points of divergence. The socially and historically critical character of some of these works is visible in how they choose premises for their stories that are moderately to highly uncomfortable for readers accustomed to the universe we currently live in.

Naturally, what is available in the English language may later in time be complemented with the translations of non-English works, such as Christian Kracht's *Alternativweltgeschichte Ich werde hier sein im Sonnenschein und im Schatten* (I will be here, in the sunlight and the shade, 2008), where the Swiss Soviet Republic (SSR) comes into being after Lenin remains in exile there – that is, because Russia suffers devastation from a much more drastic version of the 1908 Tungushka event (the book is available, as of 2019, in Russian, Bulgarian, Dutch, Polish, Swedish, Korean, Norwegian and Croatian, but not in English).

Conclusion

As the above analysis and overview may show, there is value in studying counterfactuals as well as insights offered about the plausibility of various points of divergence and counterfactual scenarios in works of speculative fiction. It may strongly stimulate historians' and social scientists' thinking about counterfactual scenarios, compelling them to strive for more realistic speculation about "what if" type propositions, which is an inherent part of their work, regardless of whether they admit this or if they are aware of this.⁴

Besides that this is as entertaining an endeavour as it is potentially quite productive, it may also tell us much in terms of critical thinking, questioning the norms and assumptions of societies in both the era, where the given piece of fiction takes place, and the present, in which the authors concerned wrote their works.

As a research agenda, it may be interesting to expand the present inquiry in the future, to look at the alternative history speculative fiction covering other historical periods and events as well.

⁴ Take the example of the recent heated debate in Hungary about the proposition that the United States could have saved Hungarian Jews from deportation during WWII and that the German occupation of Hungary unfolded in part provoked by signals from the United States (with the matching counterfactual proposition implying that in the absence of those signals, the occupation would not have taken place). For the record, it may be worth to note (although this would obviously require closer examination) that in this author's view neither of the above same-government/different-decision counterfactual propositions should be assigned a high plausibility value. That is, given the unlikely winnability of a U.S. and/or British decision to introduce airborne troops *en masse* in Hungary in defence of a Hungarian leadership of questionable reliability, with fragile (aerial) re-supply lines, with the Soviet Union advancing towards the country's territory at the time from the east, and with the country's territory being surrounded by areas controlled by German and German-allied forces. See the source of the above debate in: Borhi László: „Amerika és Nagy-Britannia provokálta ki a német megszállást” [America (*sic!*) and Great Britain provoked Germany into occupying Hungary], hvg.hu, 19 March 2019, at https://hvg.hu/20190319_Amerika_es_NagyBritannia_provokalta_ki_a_nemet_megszallast (accessed on 3 October 2019).

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