Towards bad history? A call for the use of counterfactual historical reasoning in history education

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ABSTRACT: In this article we argue for the use of Counterfactual Historical Reasoning (CHR) in history education. Within the discipline of History the use of CHR as a reasoning and research strategy is very controversial. However, different studies show the potential of CHR for achieving the important students' competencies of historical and creative thinking. We show this potential using a CHR assignment that teacher students from the University of Groningen developed for secondary school students in their last year of pre-university education. We conclude that CHR could be used in history education to uncover and undermine assumptions, expand imagination, argue and reason from a historical context, ask historical questions and analyse sources in a very effective way.

KEYWORDS: History Education; Counterfactual Reasoning; History Didactics; What If History; Historical Reasoning.

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.
[Robert Frost]

We face choices every day, such as which route to take. Often, the choice seems obvious. Other times, we have to take a leap of faith without knowing where we will land. Although in hindsight the options seem to have been limited to just one, upon closer inspection that number is revealed to be much higher. Each time, the following question arises: to what extent can we truly know the consequences of our choices? Should we have taken a different route after all? Would our future have been completely different if we had?

For historians, it is unnatural to see the present as anything other than the only possible outcome of historical events. However, that does not mean that those historical events were the only ones possible and that therefore our present is the most logical result of the choices made in the past. Historians can only partially reconstruct the road that was travelled, due to a lack of clues. Often, the image they invoke is no more than a construction. If it is not necessarily the most logical result of a chain of events, then what would the present look like if that chain of events had happened differently? And if our view of the past is mainly based on human reconstruction that masks the holes in our knowledge about that past, what does that say about that view and how should we proceed?

Does considering questions such as these enrich the level of students' historical thinking and reasoning - the core of modern history teaching? We, as teacher and history teacher

trainer, feel that *counterfactual historical reasoning* (CHR) can not only contribute to the advancement of students' historical reasoning, but also stimulate students' creative and critical thinking process. Moreover, we think that it will make students aware of the dangers of determinism and judgements based on hindsight that are implicit in so many analyses concerning past events. In our opinion, it will also offer a greater insight into important aspects of historical reasoning and thinking, such as continuity and change, historical context and significance. Finally, we see the use of CHR as a good reason to make students think concretely about the role of historians as it concerns representations and explanation of the past as well as their research methods.

In this article, we want to argue for the use of CHR as a learning strategy in history classes in order to advance students' critical thinking and historical reasoning. In order to this, we would like to describe what we consider CHR to be. Next, we will talk about the relationship between CHR, historical reasoning and thinking. Finally, the practical applications of CHR in history classes will be discussed in an assignment designed by history students from the teacher education programme at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, and we will draw conclusions regarding the use of CHR as a learning strategy in history education.

Counterfactual historical reasoning: a conceptualisation

In the literature, CHR has many names. The most common are *what if history, alternative history* and *virtual history* (e.g., Bunzl, 2004; Collins, 2007; Ferguson, 1997; Gini-Newman, 2003, 2004; Lebow, 2007; Tetlock, Lebow & Parker, 2006). We prefer the term *CHR*, because it emphasises that it is a way of reasoning that can be utilised as a cognitive class activity. CHR concerns itself with asking the *what if questions* about history, such as: would the Holocaust have taken place if Hitler had been killed in 1938? Or: Would the Cold War conflict in Asia have become the Vietnam War if John F. Kennedy had not been assassinated in 1963? In doing this, we examine the past on the basis of events that did not take place, or that would have had a different outcome occurred than the ones that did (Bunzl, 2004).

CHR is employed often in different environments, such as business, defence or politics (e.g., MacKay, 2007; Mintzberg, Alhstrand & Lampel, 1998; Neustadt & May, 1986; Van der Heijden, 1996). The creation of scenarios helps to develop strategies and inform decisions. For instance, the Western governments' unanimous and transparent policy concerning Stalin after 1945 was in part based on the assumption that if the Western leaders had acted more sternly again Hitler in the thirties, his need for expansion might have been contained. Nevertheless, this manner of reasoning is often seen as a mortal sin within the scientific historical community. Historians should base themselves on factual source material and not on assumptions, possible historical events or their own imagination (e.g., Carr, 1990; Croce, 1966; Thompson, 1978). Opponents of CHR find it amusing, but not fitting with historical research due to its speculative nature.

However, not all historians are so opposed to working with counterfactuals. In the twentieth century, several prominent historians certainly saw it as more than just a nice game that fuelled the imagination. For instance, in 1931, J.C. Squire published the popular collection of essays *If it had happened otherwise*. This collection contained essay with titles such as: *If Booth Had Missed Lincoln, If the Moors in Spain Had Won* and *If Lee Had Not Won the Battle of Gettysburg*. The final essay was written by Winston Churchill and several well-known historians such as Herbert Fischer, Hillaire Belloc, George Macaulay Trevelyan and Hendrik Willen van Loon contributed to the collection. It was Fogel (1964) who attracted attention to CHR as a research strategy. In his book *Railroads and American Economic*

Growth: Essays in Econometric History, he tried to argue what the American economy might have looked like without railways.

In the 1990s there was a revival of CHR. Hawthorne (1991) published *Plausible Worlds: Possibility and Understanding in History and the Social Sciences*. Based on this, Ferguson (1997) published a collection of essays called *Virtual History: Alternative and Counterfactuals,* for which he himself wrote an exhaustive introduction, in which he describes possible theoretical applications of CHR. He attempted to emphasise the unforeseen in history, and criticised deterministic theories such as Marxism. Cowley (1991) published a collection of essays in which several prominent historians examine historical events with the aid of CHR. Apparently, all these historians realised that CHR could most certainly make a useful contribution to examining the past. However, can CHR be of use in history education?

Stimulating historical thinking and reasoning trough CHR

The Creative and Critical Thinking Project by The Five Colleges of Ohio (2006) posits that critical and creative thinking consists of, among other things:

> The faculty or action of producing ideas, especially mental images of what is not present or had not been experienced; the ability to consider alternative points of views; ways of life; and beliefs both across time and across social and physical space. Imagination is also the ability to pose counterfactuals (what ifs), to suppose, and to reason through the implications of such alternative scenarios. (p. 1)

Historical thinking and reasoning is a manner in which this critical and creative thinking about the past manifests itself. Not just in the field of science, but also in primary and secondary education (e.g., National Center for History in the Schools, 1996). Where the focus used to be on learning historical facts by heart, nowadays it is demanded from students to also use this knowledge to think and reason (e.g., Lévesque, 2008; Seixas & Morton, 2013; Van Drie & Van Boxtel, 2008). In many scientific studies, ways to measure and stimulate the level of historical thinking and reasoning in students are being researched. In the Netherlands, the following framework (see Figure 1) is the starting point for the formation of theories concerning historical thinking and reasoning (Van Drie & Van Boxtel, 2008).
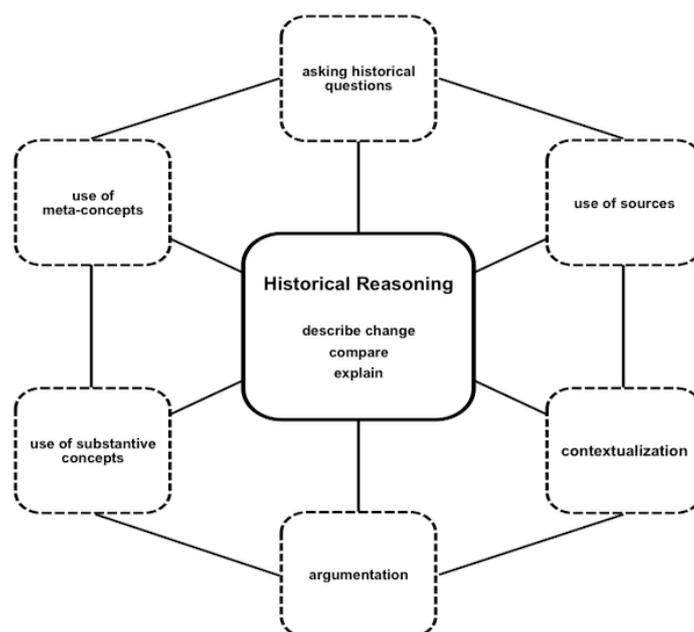

Fig 1. Historical Reasoning Framework
Based on the work of Van Drie & Van Boxtel (2008, p. 90).

In their mutual dependence, the competences identified in Figure 1 form the core of domain A of the final examination programme of Dutch history education. This domain describes what students should be able to do at the end of their time in school. Domains B, C and D are concerned with what students are supposed to know (historical content knowledge). It should also enable the students to think about history on a meta-level, for instance about the question how our image of the past comes to be. In reality, however, we have noticed that many students and teachers struggle with this tremendously. This is because for many students, history merely consists of a more or less logical chain of events that could not have happened differently. We call this concept *creeping determinism* (Hawkins & Hastie, 1990; MacKay & McKiernan, 2004). This concept can lead to misconceptions, such as depicting people in the past as "dumb" or "not knowing any better". These thoughts get in the way of historical explanations of events (Lee & Ashby, 2001).

Working with CHR can make students aware of the fact that historical events are the result of choices made by people, and that these choices could have been made differently and have different outcomes. It can also make them aware that the past as it appears to us is in fact no more than a historian's construction. The resulting picture, after all, is based on the scarce remaining clues. Interpreting these clues is difficult and time-consuming. As Sladék (2007) notes:

> This continuous process of verification, completion, but even expunging of specific historical facts and rewriting of historical narratives evidences the fact that the historical world presented is *incomplete* and *full of gaps* – just like fiction. (p. 1)

In this sense, historians wrestle with the same problem as someone who reasons on the basis of historical counterfactuals. As a result of the lack of data, both create a narrative of a possible past. In both cases, this possible world must be physically plausible (Sladék, 2007). However, this is also where the differences begin; in historical thinking and reasoning, what is lacking in knowledge is of an epistemological nature. We do not know all the events and facts from the past, nor will we ever be able to.

In CHR, these omissions are also ontological in nature. Events that occur in the created, counterfactual world do not actually exist and never have (Doležel, 1998). Another difference is the historical narrative, that, to a lesser or greater extent, is deterministic in nature. After all, the knowledge gained in hindsight was used to reason towards the present moment. That moment somehow forms the framework through which historians view and examine the past. In CHR, that aspect hardly plays a role, if at all. In CHR, historians have to put themselves in the position of the contemporary for whom all options of the future are still wide open: "for whom the selection was not closed by the actualization of one of them" (Doležel, 1998, 2004). Rather, historians take on the role of futurologist in the past: they consider the future's possibilities and on the basis of this sketch an alternative path that the past never took. In doing this, they must always avail themselves of the actual elements of historical thinking and reasoning, such as *historical significance, continuity and change, cause and effect, historical contextualisation* and *the ethical dimension* that all play a large part in the ability to think and reason in a historical context (Huijgen et al., 2014; Levesque, 2008; Seixas & Morton, 2013).

Historical significance is concerned with the question when events, developments, or (actions by) people become historically relevant. For CHR, the most important criterion is that an event can only be called significant when it is of great consequence for a great number of people and/or when these consequences are in effect for a longer period of time. Detecting these radical events takes analytical reasoning skills. After all, it usually concerns a sequence of events, the last of which corrodes societal order in such a way that "a chain of occurrences" is set in motion that "transforms" "durably . . . previous structures and practices" (Sewell,

1996, p. 834) Within the framework of CHR, this moment is a suitable point of divergence, i.e. the moment where the past takes an alternative path.

There is a direct correlation between this moment and the meta-concepts of *cause and effect* and *continuity and change*. Because CHR assumes a physically possible world, being able to reason from such concepts as original setting and historical context is of great importance in working with historical counterfactuals. In addition, CHR can also shape other important elements of historical thinking and reasoning that are asked of history students, such as thinking about history and the moral goals of the field, creating an oral or written alternative historical narrative and comparing, evaluating and analysing different narratives. With the aid of these elements, teachers are able to develop tasks that challenge students to show their high-level thinking capacities in the field of historical reasoning and thinking.

The role of CHR in teacher education

Roberts (2011) described how CHR can be introduced in history classes. His interesting seven-step approach, however, takes up quite a lot of the available lessons: 13 till 18. In 2014, we formulated an assignment for the history students of the University of Groningen's teacher training academy to make them work with CHR over the course of a few lessons with the goal of advancing their historical thinking and reasoning. After an introduction to the phenomenon of CHR and its relation to historical thinking and reasoning, the students had to design a CHR assignment for students in their last year of pre-university education. It had to consist of the following stages.

1. Choose and describe an historical narrative.

2. In this historical narrative, pinpoint three points of divergence and pick one as a starting point for an alternative historical scenario. Motivate this choice with historical and plausible arguments.

3. From the chosen point of divergence, work out the alternative scenario until you can argue for a historically sound and plausible narrative. In order to do this, you must first come up with an "umbrella" question: a question that frames the alternative scenario and foresees a possible end point.

4. Finish the task by formulating assignments that appeal to students' capabilities in historical thinking and reasoning in which they have to compare the two narratives.

This assignment led to many great examples, one of which we would like to highlight here. The historical narrative chosen was the fall of the Berlin wall. The students opted for three possible points of divergence: August 1989, the month during which the border between Austria and Hungary was opened. This moment can be seen as the beginning of the end of the tensions between East and West during the Cold War. The second possible point of divergence was November 9th, 1989, at exactly 6:57 PM: at this moment a press conference was taking place in Berlin, concerning the relaxation of the rules of crossing the border from East to West Berlin that included the potentially purposeful slip of the tongue by Schabowski - spokesperson for the East German government - that the border would be opened straight away. The third possible point of divergence chosen was the same evening but slightly later, namely exactly 11:52 PM. At this exact moment Harald Jäger, commander of the border crossing at the Bornholmderstrasse, watched a large crowd of people from East Berlin approach and said: "Screw this. I am opening the border. The citizens of the DDR are free."

The students developed the latter scenario into an alternative narrative consisting of the following stages. Border guard Jäger gives the order to fire into the crowd, resulting in many casualties. The West is shocked and, represented by Bush, decide to repeal any and all

agreements reached with the Soviets concerning the disarmament. The Cold War reaches a new, icy stage. Gorbachev is deposed. Vladimir Kryuchkov, head of the KGB, replaces him and rules the Soviet empire with a firm hand. "Almost thirty years after the Cuban missile crisis, the Cold War has reached an absolute low point for the second time."

This example illustrates the importance of choosing well-thought-out points of divergence. These points must be concrete moments in history, historical compactions of the past, and where possible distilled down to the smallest possible relevant chronological unit: the minute. This way, students can experience that the historical chain of events is not necessarily dependent upon the strict historical law of cause and effect, but often the result of coincidences that are unintentional and in hindsight less logical than historical research or schoolbook methods make them seem. Interpreting the past - the core of historical reasoning - is dependent on many a happy or unhappy, occasionally unexpected, coincidence.

In order to stimulate the high school students' historical thinking and reasoning, the students devised several more assignments to go with the scenarios. The students had to compare both narratives and recognise the similarities and differences. Another assignment was to detect a new point of divergence in the alternative scenario and use it as a jumping off point for an alternative narrative in which the Cold War would end within the foreseeable future. In our assignment, both narratives were written by history teachers in training who thought up assignments to go with them for the students. It is of course possible to have the students themselves choose and argue the point of divergence and pick one to describe an alternative past chain of events. However, that would take great knowledge of the subject at hand.

Conclusion

Many teachers that we spoke to do not spend a lot of time on philosophical historical debate. Nevertheless, this could help students to see the possibilities and limitations of history as a school subject. Wherein lies the power and use of studying history? What is the role of historians? An exchange of views about questions such as these, spurred on by an assignment on CHR, can not only contribute to the students' insight into historical processes, historical representation and awareness, but also their motivation.

In our eyes, CHR is highly suitable to stimulating students' critical and creative thinking, as well as their historical thinking and reasoning. They can uncover and undermine assumptions, expand their imagination, argue and reason from a historical context, ask historical questions and analyse sources. In other words: the use of the concept of an alternative historical world enables students to a high level of historical thinking and reasoning. For this, the task developed by the students of the teacher education programme at the University of Groningen offers many starting points, especially when the high school students need to develop their own alternative scenario. Because then, they have to appeal to their creativity without turning the narrative into fiction and without violating the historical method that underlies historical thinking and reasoning. If they then also evaluate the role of historians in the representation of the past, we believe that this is one of the highest levels students in history education can reach.

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