

# Counter-factual Modeling of the Past: Philosophical and Pedagogical Aspect

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**Abstract**—A counter-factual modeling is considered, which is of the past (CFM) as a means of solving pedagogical tasks within a number of humanitarian disciplines (historical science, philosophy of history, social philosophy, etc.). The purpose of the article is to highlight specific forms of the CFM use in pedagogy. It has been revealed that CFM is most often used for simulation and comparative analysis, implemented and potential variants. It was shown that in the first case the following pedagogical methods had been used: preparation for future activities; learning from the experience of more successful predecessors; expansion of the variability of cogitation and action; move away from the fatalistic perception of the past. In the second case — other methods were used: identifying trends in the formation of potential events; the establishment of complex principles of non-implementation of events; the need to give descriptions of surreal situations. In combination, these means of knowledge make the study of the past an interesting and useful process for people nowadays.

**Keywords**—counter-factual modeling of the past; historical science; philosophy of history; "lessons of the past"; pedagogy; imitational modeling.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Counter-factual modeling of the past (CFM) is the most important multidisciplinary endeavor of modern scientific cognition. The comprehensive studies of historical alternatives nonrealized in practice are conducted. The questions are addressed the topic "what would happen if?" and scientifically based answers are given on them. According to the authors, the methodology of the CFM includes a number of stages: 1) the formation of alternative historical hypotheses (carried out at the personalist, eventful, factor levels); 2) the creation of detailed descriptions of the potential past (scenarios); 3) their verification by various methods [1]. It is indicative that scientific attempts to engage in the CFM are already discussed in Aristotle's "Poetics", and in the "History of Rome" (1st century BC) by Titus

Livius we find a detailed (with the analysis criteria highlighted) scenario describing a potential war of the Ancient Rome and the armed forces of Alexander III of Macedon (which could not take place really). In the future, scientists (represented by K. Clausewitz, D. Milo, S. Hook, I.V. Bestuzhev-Lada, and others) offer certain rules for creating alternative historical scenarios.

In addition, it must be borne in mind that CFM is used beyond science too. For example, it is actively used in imaginative literature, where numerous stories, tales, novels describing potential versions of the past were created. Moreover, the most popular theme among writers is the theme of "portal travelers" i.e. people that found themselves in the past and are trying to change it actively. (Beginning in the XX century from the book by M. Twain, "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court"). Descriptions and consequences of success in the Second World War of the Axis countries (Germany, Italy, Japan) are given in F. Dick "Man in the High Castle", R. Harris "Fatherland", etc.

The CFM is used by various politicians who try to justify some projects and initiatives with its help. Thus, the political elite of Lithuania, Latvia in the 1990s and 2000s, put forward the thesis: if these states were not joined by force to the USSR in 1940, today these countries would live at the economic level of Finland or Sweden. Hence, the Russian Federation, as the successor of the USSR, must compensate them the consequences of the "occupation". With this approach (the CFM in politics), the hypothesis, as a rule, is followed by an "unambiguous" conclusion, and the scenario of the potential past is simply absent.

But that's not all. Even in Russian secondary schools, pupils can get a question: "what would happen to Russia in the 20th century without two world wars?" as a topic for writing. Against a similar background of interest in the CFM as part of everyday consciousness, a survey of readers in October 2015 by the American magazine *The New York*

*Magazine* on the topic “If you could go back in time and kill Hitler when he was a child, would you do it?” is not surprising [2]. Or the live vote on the TV channel “Dozhd” on January 27, 2014, on the issue of “humanity” of putting the city of the German army in 1941 on the day of the seventieth anniversary of the lifting of the blockade of Leningrad [3].

The facts of mass use of CFM in science and beyond (fiction, politics, etc.) speak about the importance and popularity of this means of knowing the past both among ordinary people and among scientists [4] [5]. However, the question arises: what for? What does CFM teach a man if he stands up on the “shaky” ground of historical hypotheses using this tool of knowledge? A lot of mistakes can be made in the counterfactual interpretation, breaking up with the well-known (like the multiplication table) description of the past in history textbooks. The answer to the question about the pedagogical relevance of the CFM and its philosophical foundations is the subject of this work.

## II. IMITATIONAL MODELING

The CFM (both at the level of everyday and scientific knowledge) allows a person to put himself mentally in the place of another historical character (abstract or concrete) and, on this basis, to suggest some options for action. A similar mental experience can be made with yourself. Returning to some point in the past of himself life, one find an option that was not used there and reconstruct (create a scenario) of its implementation. Let's note what gives such simulation modeling in pedagogical terms:

### A. Preparation for Future Business Function (Especially Military and Administrative)

So, already the ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius suggested some students to take the place of the ruler of the country, the governor in a large area, the commander and talk about potential actions in this case. The teacher corrected the incoming answers, revealed situational and typical (repeating) errors. In the classroom, the teacher used the design “if” answering questions from students. They asked Confucius: “And with whom, the Teacher, would you be, when would the troops be led?” After analyzing the situation, he replied: “Not with someone who can rush at a tiger with his bare hands or rush into the river and die without regret. But without fail - with those who, starting to work, are full of caution and with their love for drawing up plans, succeeds” [6]. Thus, the CFM meets the interests of both the past and the future in the pedagogical plan.

### B. Learning from the Experience of More Successful Predecessors

You mentally take the place of a specific character of the past, who made (from your point of view) optimal decisions and in the modeled situation you are also trying to find out your own winning model of behavior. Thus, in contrasting the rulers who unleashed numerous wars and ordinary people who were looking for peaceful solutions to conflicts, G.B. Mably pointed out: “Ask yourself (monarchs approx. auth.)

would Aristide, Fabrizio, Phocion, Cato, Epaminondus do this?” [7].

### C. Expanding the Variability of Thinking and Action

Known from Russian fairy tales, the bogatyr Ilya from the city of Murom faced a “gorych-stone”, where options for his future activities and their consequences were written (go straight - be killed, go right - be married, go left - be rich. Ilya checked in practice the first two options, by force and cunning, replacing their content, rejected the third one as unacceptable without verification, implemented the fourth one, not marked on the “stone” - went to serve the Kiev Prince Vladimir). In the language of modern synergy, “gorych-stone” is an analogue of the “bifurcation point”, which also contains a number of options for the further development of the system [8]. A person can mentally return to such a transitional state and reconsider both decision-making motives and follow any of the previously unrealized ways on the basis of the CFM [9] [10]. It is likely that a set of actions close in content to a person will have to be repeated in new conditions in a different situation in the future. Here, pedagogy goes into practice (for example, having chosen the profession of a psychologist once, but wishing to be a doctor, after the CFM of personal fate one will make this choice).

One can do a similar mental experiment with a different historical character, for example, Napoleon on the day of the decisive battle with the allied army at Waterloo on June 18, 1815, to look for a winning solution for the problem for him. Moreover, since the real actions of the emperor and their consequences are known, the descendants are looking for alternatives to his actions with enviable constancy (see, for example, the work “Napoleonic Wars. What if ...?”).

### D. Avoiding Fatalism

The presentation of the traditional past is often in the nature of a predetermined process. But this is not always the case. Putting themselves in the place of historical characters, modeling the options they have missed, the ordinary man and the scientist get an idea that the situation can be changed, reveal means, how it can be done [11]. For example, just as the world chess champion A.A. Alekhin loved to sit at the board with a hopeless position and reduced it, playing, either to victory or to a draw. For example, it is possible to say a lot and fairly that before February 1917, Nicholas II had few opportunities to prevent a revolution in the country, but they were, and they should be known. This requires mentally putting oneself in the place of the emperor and looking for a solution [12]. The fatalistic position that “everything, that was previously, prepared the October,” the Bolsheviks coming to power (M.N. Pokrovsky and others) provides little food for a creative, useful interpretation of history.

## III. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF VARIANTS

A simple reconstruction of the alternative cannot, in our opinion, be a goal in itself for the CFM. Its task is to compare the realized and potential state of affairs. Numerous “lessons” also appear here, i.e. the information about the past,

which the traditional historical knowledge does not give [13]. In relation to political history, the essence of this approach was formulated in the XVIII century. by G. Bolingbroke: "That great benefit that we should receive from studying history cannot be obtained if we do not train ourselves to compare the behavior of different governments and different parties ... and observe the actions to which they resorted or could resort, and the possible and real consequences that flowed from those and others. *Through this exercise of the mind, the study of history is ahead of experience ... and prepares us for action* (italics aut.) "[14]. What can this approach teach? We note a number of directions:

#### A. Identifying Trends in Potential Events

For example, if one deals with the CFM events of 1825 (Decembrist revolt) for Russia, then one can come to the following conclusions. Firstly **is** to reveal the alternative tactics of the losers. To understand that with more action on Senatskaya Square, the presence of a backup leadership center, the movement participants had a chance to overthrow the monarchy in St. Petersburg and seize power. Secondly, the comparison of reality and its potential variant gives at least three scenarios. Neutral (the Decembrists coming to power in fact would not change anything in the socio-economic history of Russia — V.O. Klyuchevsky); pessimistic-catastrophic (the victory of the rebels is the prologue to the many years of civil war, as happened in reality after the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917 — A.A. Bushkov, V.B. Rezun-Suvorov, etc.); optimistic (the Decembrists, despite certain costs, implement their program of transformations, which leads to the acceleration of the country modernization) [15]. As a result, a comparison of the realized and the potential variants shows that the latter is also not homogeneous, it may contain various trends. This is an important "lesson" given with the help of the CFM of the past.

#### B. Establishing Complex Causes of Non-implementation of Events

For example, with the CFM of landing operations on the British Isles in the days of Napoleon (1804-1805) and the Nazis (1940), it becomes clear why the implementation of these events was postponed and not implemented in practice. These are: 1) the weakness of the own Navy of France and Germany; 2) long waiting for "favorable" weather conditions in the English Channel; 3) the lack of proper coordination of actions of the armed forces (Navy, land forces, and in 1940 aviation too); 4) mistakes in the operation planning; 5) rejection of innovations, incl. technical (Napoleon did not use the ships available in the USA, and the Nazis were able to create landing rafts only by 1942, when it was too late) [16].

#### C. The Need to Give Descriptions of Surreal Situations

Earlier it was said that the implemented version was compared with the potential one and useful information was extracted from it. Meanwhile, the teaching of philosophy, for example, requires the disclosure of the content of a variant that has never been implemented in practice [17]. Let us take

the various projects of the "ideal state" that have arisen from antiquity (Plato), appeared in the Modern history ("Utopia" by T. More, "City of the Sun" by T. Campanella, "New Atlantis" by F. Bacon, etc.) They were not implemented in practice. Therefore, often the analysis of these models for students is in the nature of acquaintance with some fantasies of thinkers, i.e. is a useless exercise. The situation can be seen from the other hand if we apply the CFM. Moreover, this does not require much fantasizing. The prerequisites for the implementation of "utopias" already were implemented in practice. Plato traveled twice to implement the "ideal state" project on the island of Sicily to local tyrants Dionysios the Elder and the Younger. In reality, both rulers rejected Plato's idea, the thinker almost paid with his life for the indicated attempts. But after all, one of the rulers could have agreed with Plato's proposal. Hence the CFM effects of the creation the "ideal state" in Sicily of IV BC can be used to teach both the history of the ancient world (antiquity) and philosophy. It will make this topic more abstract and more interesting for students. In the same way, "Utopia" can be "applied" to England of the XVI century. (considering that T. More had real political power), "City of the Sun" - to Italy and "New Atlantis" to England in the early XVII century. Of course, such a CFM should be based on knowledge of local historical conditions. This approach will also be useful in a futuristic way: it teaches students (among whom may be future politicians) that the hypothesizing involves the creation of a scenario in the CFM.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The question of why history is needed, the study of the past constantly worried thinkers, especially the thinkers of the Modern history, were concluded that the story gives people new information, teaches them something [18]. As it was noted in the XVII century by J. Locke, "There is nothing more instructive and at the same time entertaining than the story. The first of these qualities makes it worthy of study for adults; the second ... is very suitable for a young boy "[19]. By the beginning of the XIX century the opposite point of view appears, which G.V.F. Hegel formulated as follows: "the peoples and governments never learned anything from history and did not act in accordance with the teachings that could be learned from it" [20]. The truth is somewhere in the middle between the two extreme positions.

However, if we agree with J. Locke, the question arises: how, in what way can we learn from history? According to the authors, the use of CFM is one of the most positive ways. Some thinkers here are cautious and believe that such an approach performs exclusively "auxiliary functions for strengthening the argumentation of the natural character of the realized course of historical events" [21]. So, the CFM only allows understanding better why the past has become exactly the same as in reality. Other experts completely deny the opportunity to learn something from the CFM. According to O.A. Dmitriev, the "alternative history" is unacceptable as a means of in-depth study of history ... harmful for the formation of the historical consciousness of young people (italics aut.), because the student does not always distinguish fiction from accomplished facts" [22]. This ambivalence

about the pedagogical function of the CFM (to learn in a limited extent or to reject at all?) is not accidental; it expresses the concerns of a part of the scientific community, and will continue further.

In our opinion, the CFM is one of the ways to make history necessary “for life and work, and not for convenient evasion from life and activity” (as Nietzsche also suggested [23]). From a boring string of dates and facts to be memorized, history will grow into a science that provides food for the modern mind, in a constantly relevant discipline. Such is the philosophical (ideological and epistemological) and pedagogical meaning of the CFM. Perhaps then, with its help, history will turn, as G. Bolingbroke dreamed, into a philosophy that “teaches us through examples” [24].

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