Counterfactual thinking and other natural acts? Students' use of counterfactuals for evaluating historical explanations

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Kort kommentar från författaren

Den här texten är ett utkast till en artikel, som är tänkt att utgöra sista delstudien i min sammanläggning avhandling om historiska förklaringar. I avvägningen mellan att inte ge potentiella läsare för mycket material och att ge en rimlig representation av texten som helhet har jag valt att luta mer åt det senare hållet, huvudsakligen av rent egoistiska skäl: det som jag i första hand behöver synpunkter på är inledning, teori och metod. Det som har utgått är den avslutande diskussionen, som jag för närvarande håller på att revidera. Den läsare som är mer intresserad av empirin och möjliga slutsatser kan fokusera på resultatdelen.
Introduction

Learning history demands more than just learning facts. In order to encapsulate what history is about, theorists of history education have formulated historical thinking concepts, inspired by academic history, to encapsulate the competencies associated with history as a school subject, such as historical evidence, continuity and change, and cause and consequence (Seixas & Morton, 2013). While there is much merit in this approach, there is a risk that such focus on disciplinary concepts and methods stifle student interest, forcing them to adhere to standards that are too rigid for history education. For instance, Samuel Wineburg argues that 'historical thinking, in its deepest forms, is neither a natural process nor something that springs automatically from psychological development' (Wineburg, 2001:7), the implication being that only through teaching of a disciplinary approach can students learn to read 'like a historian (Wineburg, Martin & Monte-Sano, 2011). This notion of putting academic history as the goal for history education may well hold for the aspect of historical thinking that Wineburg focuses on, historical evidence, but it is not given that it applies equally to all historical thinking concepts. Specifically, when it comes to the concept pair of cause and consequence, the building blocks of historical explanations, adhering too strictly to the discipline may be problematic, since the explanatory practices of professional historians may not be ideal for history teaching purposes.

Historical explanations can be considered a core aspect of teaching and learning history, as explanations tend to be included in overviews of what history education should be about. (Drie & van Boxtel, 2008; Åmark, 2011; Seixas & Morton, 2013). While this is generally not disputed, the discussion of how to advance students' understanding of historical explanations is more open-ended, possibly due to the heterogeneous notions of which criteria historical explanations should be judged by (cf. McCullagh, 1998; Hewitson, 2014). Some fundamental
ideas of explanations that have a bearing on history education is that historical causal relationships should be presented as complex and multi-faceted, and that students need to learn how to evaluate the importance of different causal factors (Lee & Shemilt, 2009; Seixas & Morton, 2013). One method suggested for enhancing explanatory reasoning in history is the use of counterfactuals, which is the topic of interest in this study. However, counterfactual reasoning is a disputed matter in the discipline of history.

The value of counterfactual reasoning in historiography is contentious. Traditionally, historians have frowned upon counterfactual reasoning (see for example Carr, 1961; Fischer, 1971:15-21), while it more recently has been discussed as a potentially valuable heuristic device for engaging with historical explanations (see for instance Gaddis, 2002; Megill, 2007; Lebow, 2010; Sunstein, 2016; cf. Evans, 2014, for a more sceptic view). It is not hard to understand why historians are wary of counterfactuals: asking 'what if' opens up many questions which are not empirically verifiable, and thus the counterfactual path easily veers into pure speculation. Even so, counterfactuals do occur within historical writing, and have attracted analyses of their use as a rhetorical device (Kozuchowski, 2014; Rosenfeld, 2016).

Within history education research, the approach towards the use of counterfactuals for engaging in historical explanations has been cautiously optimistic, Woodcock (2011) suggesting that 'they can lead to fresh insight into how and why a particular event or process was caused and into how important particular causes were' before warning that they can lead astray (p. 128; cf. Seixas & Morton, 2013:114). Empirical researchers have used counterfactuals, and noted that students easily engage with them, lending credence to their potential as a tool for teaching historical explanations (Chapman, 2003; Woodcock, 2005; Lilliestam, 2013; Buxton, 2010; Roberts, 2014; Carroll, 2018), and others have called for
counterfactuals to be more acknowledged in history education (Huijgen & Holthuis, 2014). A major argument for this is that counterfactual thinking may aid in reducing hindsight bias, that is, students thinking that what actually happened was predetermined (Nolan, 2011; Rosenfeld, 2016; cf. Barton, 2008), but as Woodcock's comment above suggests, counterfactuals may also be of value for evaluating explanations. There are thus at least two potential benefits of engaging with counterfactuals in history teaching: it may help students avoid hindsight bias, and it may aid students in evaluating historical explanations.

In this study, I will attempt to address one of the questions that mar the potential use of counterfactuals in history teaching: what does it mean that counterfactuals can be valuable if 'used with caution' (Woodcock, 2011:128), or that the counterfactuals used need to be 'respectable' (Chapman, 2003:49)? In other words, how can counterfactuals be qualified in a way so that history teachers may discern between counterfactuals that are useful for developing historical thinking related to explanations, and counterfactuals that are not so useful? This problem forms the point of departure for the present study, which investigates how Swedish upper secondary school students employ counterfactuals when reasoning about historical explanations. The focus here is thus on students' use of counterfactual statements, rather than that of teachers'. Linked to this is the subsidiary aim of testing theoretical notions of how historical counterfactuals can be seen as more or less qualified. The research questions I aim to answer are:

1) To what extent do students use counterfactual statements when evaluating a historical explanation?
2) How can students' historical counterfactuals be categorized as more or less qualified for advancing understandings of historical explanations?
In order to investigate this, I use student responses to a prompt calling for the students to evaluate an individual's importance for explaining a historical event. In the prompt, the individual is Hitler, and the event in question is the Nazi seizure of power in Germany. This empirical material is analysed with the help of theoretically based ideas of how counterfactuals can be qualified.

A theoretical approach to qualifying counterfactuals

The analysis of historical counterfactuals in this study is inspired by Woodward's (2003) counterfactual theory of causal explanation. According to Woodward, causal explanations can be understood as 'exhibiting patterns of counterfactual dependence', meaning that they can, at least hypothetically, answer the question 'what if things had been different?' (p. 191).

Woodward's theory builds on a tradition of understanding causation from a counterfactual point of view pioneered by Lewis (1973) and Mackie (1974), and which is relatively well established in qualitative research (Mahoney & Goertz, 2006). In historiography, some historians have dismissed counterfactuals as essentially too speculative to fit within historical methodology (Carr, 1961; Fischer, 1971; Evans, 2014). However, others have argued that strength with the counterfactual theory is that it does not rely on laws as a fundament of causal claims, thus presenting an alternative to the deductive-nomological model of causation that has traditionally been seen as the default model for understanding causality (Woodward, 2003:152; Seppälä, 2012; Hewitson, 2014: 5-7). Furthermore, proponents of some variation of the counterfactual theory of causation have argued that counterfactuals are an integral part of historical explanations (Megill, 2007; Nolan, 2011; Seppälä, 2012; Sunstein, 2016). This, together with the empirical findings mentioned
previously, indicates that counterfactuals are a potentially fruitful means for working with historical explanations in education. But in order to use it to analyse the empirical data, categories for different qualities of historical counterfactuals need to be established.

First, it is important to recognize that not all counterfactuals are alike. Nolan (2011:318) gives the following examples (among others):

1) If Napoleon had not invaded Russia in 1812, Paris would not have fallen in 1814.

2) If an equal number of Japanese ninjas and Caribbean pirates had fought a battle, the pirates would have won.

Nolan's point is that statement 2 appears as an obviously irrelevant flight of fancy, while statement 1 appears as at least potentially plausible. Why? Both Megill makes a distinction between 'restrained' and 'exuberant' counterfactuals, arguing that restrained counterfactuals are the ones with value for historical reasoning. In a restrained counterfactual, the historian looks for a cause that, if changed, could have led to a different outcome than what actually happened (Megill, 2007:152-53; cf. Sunstein, 2016:436-37). Going beyond that, into elaborating upon what would then have happened in the counterfactual timeline, quickly leads to the 'exuberant' form of counterfactual history. Maar agrees with this idea of restrained counterfactuals, specifying that a valid counterfactual needs to encompass 'alterations to one single antecedent, while all other conditions remain fixed' (Maar 2016:362). This principle of counterfactual restraint clarifies why statement 1 above is more plausible than statement 2. When a single antecedent is manipulated counterfactually, it becomes possible to use this manipulation as an argument about the importance of the manipulated antecedent, making the
counterfactual at least principally plausible (Seppälä, 2012; Rosenfield, 2016). Such manipulation corresponds with Woodward's notion of hypothetical interventions in order to clarify causation (Woodward, 2003: 122).

Are there other ways of making counterfactuals more plausible? Returning to statement 1 above, it would be more plausible if we could provide some kind of support for the conclusion that the consequent (Paris would not have fallen in 1814) to be likely if the antecedent (Napoleon not invading Russia in 1812) had been true. One such aspect is context-sensitivity, meaning that the counterfactual needs to agree with, or at least not contradict, the known historical context (Maar, 2016; cf. Evans, 2014). What would be needed for a counterfactual to be considered context-sensitive? Presumably, it would have to be reasonably specific. Consider the following two hypothetical counterfactuals:

3) If Hitler had died, someone else might have led the Nazis to seize power.
4) If Hitler had died, someone else might have led the Nazis to seize power. For instance, Göring would probably have been able to take Hitler's place.

While these statements make the same general point, statement 3 is vague as to how the alternative outcome would actually come about. Statement 4, on the other hand, specifies an alternative, making the entire line of reasoning possible to discuss in relation to what is known about the situation, and the likelihood of Göring actually being able to replace Hitler. Alternately, an answer might specify certain actors or traits necessary for the substitute to be able to replace the actor (or, conversely, be used to argue that the actor was irreplaceable). A specific statement, as opposed to a vague or generic, is thus more qualified, since it becomes in principle possible to verify or refute it in relation to the historical context (Barton, 2008;
Samuelsson & Wendell, 2017; Wendell, 2018). This criterion of specificity, when applied to counterfactuals, needs to be applicable to both structure and actor. In the above cases, the manipulated factor is an actor, and it is easy to see how one might be able to specify alternatives. When it comes to structural factors, specificity would rather be in the form of previous events or existing conditions that are specified as decisive ('if World War I hadn't occurred, then...').

Specificity can possibly be augmented by other means. Seppälä (2012) discusses what she calls 'evidence' in support of counterfactual statements. Here, I instead use the term 'support', in order not to confuse the term with historical evidence as defined within historical thinking (cf. Seixas & Morton, 2013). Seppälä specifies two types of support: comparisons with similar cases, as well as use of generalisations. Of these, a comparative approach has been forwarded by Lebow (2010:32), and used in teaching by Buxton (2010) and Carroll (2018). Certainly, the validity of a comparison depends upon the actual similarity of the comparative case, which becomes a point of discussion in and of itself. As for generalisations, this can be defined as applying 'general theoretical knowledge of how societies, markets and humans behave into the case one is studying in order to make causal inferences' (Seppälä, 2012:58). This does not seem to have been empirically tried in the same way that the comparative approach has been, but the notion of using generalisations in order to reason about human behaviour does have theoretical support (Weber, 1949:174; cf. McCullagh, 1998:240-258). Such generalisations are not laws in the strict sense, but can be considered lawlike or 'normic' statements (Scriven, 1959; cf. Woodward, 2003:146-147 for a discussion of laws).

In order to be valuable for historical reasoning about causal factors, counterfactual statements thus need to be restrained rather than exuberant. This can be seen as the most basic criterion
for qualifying counterfactuals. As long as counterfactuals pass this test, they can be further qualified by being specific. Possible ways of further qualifying counterfactuals is by using comparisons and/or generalisations to support them.

There are other aspects of counterfactuals that may be of interest to the analysis, such as considering what is manipulated counterfactually. Lilliestam (2013:222-223) points out that counterfactual manipulation can be done on structural factors, or on historical actors. A manipulation of a structural factor entails a change in a condition influencing the studied event, for instance removing the war indemnities Germany had to pay due to the Versailles treaty. A manipulation of a historical actor rather changes something about this actor. In the context of this study, the obvious manipulation is of course removing Hitler. Lilliestam points out that there are other possibilities, such as shifting the actor to another time or place, as well as reasoning about what different actions were possible for an actor (Lilliestam, 2013; cf. Nolan, 2011).

Furthermore, it is worthwhile to consider what effect, if any, the counterfactual manipulation has on the argument being made. Here, the research interest is mainly in how counterfactuals can be used for evaluating the importance of causes, though it should be noted that counterfactuals may also have a value in clarifying what alternatives were available to historical actors, thus being a possible scaffold for historical empathy as well (Lilliestam, 2013; Huijgen & Holthuis, 2014). Logically, the counterfactual manipulation of an antecedent may lead to two different results: either, the manipulation leads to the conclusion that the consequent would not have happened, had this hypothetical change occurred, or it leads to the conclusion that the consequent would have happened anyway. In the first case, the counterfactual manipulation becomes an argument for the necessity of the antecedent, while
in the second case it becomes an argument against the necessity of the antecedent (cf. Lilliestam, 2013, Rosenfield, 2016). This aspect thus looks at how counterfactuals are used as parts of arguments. Taken together with the actor-structure distinction, this aspect makes it possible to investigate whether students tend to reinforce actual history when using counterfactuals, or whether they see possible alternative outcomes.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection was made through the use of a test question inspired by a question created by the Swedish National Agency for Education. The function of the question was as a prompt for students to reason about different interpretations of a historical event, the Nazi seizure of power in Germany in 1933.

Teachers willing to let their students participate through answering were found through social media, specifically two facebook groups for teachers in social studies and history. Seven different teachers from different upper secondary schools responded positively. One of these later backed out, leaving six teachers from different schools that did use the prompt in their classes. In all, 139 student answers were produced by this means, and these make up the source material for the study. Table 1 shows the official statistics of the Swedish department of education regarding the percentage of passing grades in history for the schools of the teachers in this study. As the table indicates, the passing grade percentage is slightly lower than the national average for schools 1, 4 and 6, slightly higher for school 2, 3, and 5. none of the schools differ more than 3,5 percentage points from the national average. All the classes involved studied the basic course in history for the upper secondary school, called History 1b.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passing grade in history</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National average</td>
<td>96,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 1</td>
<td>93,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 2</td>
<td>97,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 3</td>
<td>99,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 4</td>
<td>94,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 5</td>
<td>98,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 6</td>
<td>93,2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Percentage of passing grades in history, per school (data taken from https://www.skolverket.se/skolutveckling/statistik/sok-statistik-om-forskola-skola-och-vuxenutbildning)

This method of data collection can be seen as a form of snowball sampling (Bryman, 2012). It is not random since the participating teachers, while working at different schools, all were participating in online communities for teachers, indicating a professional interest not necessarily shared by all of their peers. They selected the participating students from their available student groups. A known weakness of this type of sampling is that participants direct the sampling by selecting other participants that they believe are 'interesting' for the study. This means that the sample of participating students is probably not representative and thus cannot be used for statistical generalisations. However, for the purposes of this study, the samples can be used for theoretical generalisations, specifically with regards to how students use counterfactual reasoning in their answers.

The prompt used to elicit student answers is presented below:

How important is a single person?

In the box below, you see a person and an event. This task is to reason about how important the person was for the event.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adolf Hitler</td>
<td>The Nazis seized power in Germany in 1933.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Below, you see two different interpretations of the person's importance for the event:

   a) The person was of great importance for the event.
   b) The person was of little importance for the event.

   Find support for both interpretation a and b by citing historical examples.

2. Compare both interpretations, and discuss their strengths and weaknesses when it comes to explaining the historical event. Use your historical examples when you reason. Use the concepts agent and structure when you discuss.

The prompt did not give any explicit instruction to reason counterfactually, instead directing students towards evaluating the two different interpretations of Hitler's importance for the explanandum. Teachers were instructed to give the students 40 minutes to complete the assignment, making the situation test-like. The teachers were given the opportunity to use the prompt as part of their own assessment practices (thus increasing the test-like circumstances), though it is unknown to what extent they did.

Once collected, the student texts were analysed in three steps. First, a content analysis was made in order to identify the presence of counterfactual statements. Second, the texts were categorized according to the manipulation of structure or actor, as well as the presence or absence of alternative outcomes. Third, the categories that were found in step 2 were further analysed using of theoretical criteria for qualification. It is important to note that the
categorization outlined previously is based on the theoretical debate about counterfactuals in historiography. In this study, the material analysed is not produced by professional historians, but rather by students of history in upper secondary school. It is to be expected that students will not be able to command the same knowledge of the historical context as a professional historian. Likewise, the fact that the student responses have been produced in a situation similar to a test may limit the potential of students to make elaborate comparisons.

The student responses vary widely in length, the shortest being around 150 words, and the longest almost 900. The quality of the texts also differs, which will be shown in the presentation of results. Within such a wide variation, there is also a wide variety of counterfactual arguments; while some students use none at all, other students use several different counterfactuals at different places in their text, and the counterfactuals within a single text need not be equally relevant or supported. In such cases, the text has been categorized based on the most qualified counterfactual in the text. This means that a text placed in the category of relevant and supported counterfactuals includes at least one such counterfactual, but may also include others, less qualified. The categorization is thus based on the best example of every text, indicating the potential for qualified counterfactual reasoning evidenced by the text, even if it is not consistent throughout. In some cases, students have given an almost equal weight to two different counterfactuals, which has then been included in the analysis - presumably this is the result of the prompt asking students to evaluate two different interpretations. Quotations from the material in the following text have been selected to illustrate the different categories found.

Results
Out of the 139 student texts engaged in the study, 114 contain at least one counterfactual statement. The use of counterfactuals is not concentrated to one or a few of the schools; a majority of students in all the classes do use some form of counterfactual, even though the prompt does not explicitly call for it. While it is possible that this is the result of each of the teachers basing their teaching practices on counterfactual reasoning, it is more likely that this spread corroborates the observations of Chapman (2003) and Buxton (2010) regarding students' own engagement in counterfactual thinking.

The 114 that contain counterfactuals have been primarily categorized according to what kind of factor is manipulated: is it a structural factor, or an actor, that is removed or changed? Additionally, the texts were checked for reasoning about the consequences of such a change. Specifically, do they mention the possibility of an alternate outcome as a result of changing a factor?

The result of this categorization is shown in Table 2. Most of the texts primarily focus on manipulating the presence of an actor, which is hardly surprising given the nature of the task. This group of texts is split almost by the middle when it comes to mentioning possible alternate outcomes. The group that instead focuses on structural factors is smaller, but within it there is an almost unanimous presence of alternate outcomes. An even smaller group does an about equal manipulation of both structural factors and an actors. A few texts in each group have been categorized as 'unclear' as regards the possibility of alternate outcomes. In these cases, the texts express strong ambiguity, such as posing rhetorical questions about alternate possibilities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Manipulated factor</th>
<th>Possibility of alternate outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 2: categorization of texts based on manipulated factor and possibility of alternate outcome

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>27</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>30</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actor</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on this table, four types of student texts can be presented more closely:

1) Actor-focused texts that mention alternate outcomes,
2) actor-focused texts that do not mention alternate outcomes,
3) structure-focused texts,
4) texts that focus on both structure and actor.

A number of secondary aspects can be connected to the types of text. One such aspect is whether the counterfactual reasoning is specific in its counterfactual claims, or if it is vague. Another aspect is whether the counterfactual reasoning is supported by comparisons, generalisations, or both.

**Absence of counterfactuals**

25 of the texts do not contain any counterfactual statements. This does not mean that the answers lack qualification; for instance, 3 of these answers use either some form of generalisation or a comparison in order to qualify their evaluation of the explanations. One such example is the following:

Briefly, structure and actor answer two different questions. The structure explains how a party like the Nazis could get the opportunity to seize power in Germany. The actor, Hitler, answers the question why the Nazis in particular were able to exploit this situation /.../ An actor, such as Adolf Hitler, is a product of his time and can seem absurd or irrelevant from a modern
perspective. While a structure can give a reasonable answer to why something happened, irrespective of time. (4-23)

The reasoning builds on what could be called a 'theoretical' generalisation based on the concepts of structure and actor in order to analyse the question. This indicates an advanced conceptual understanding, accomplished without the use of explicit counterfactuals.

However, the above example seems to be the exception, rather than the rule: the majority of texts do contain counterfactuals, and the majority who do not struggle with giving an adequate response to the question. Some of these texts merely reproduce facts, while others attempt to use consequences in order to support their evaluation:

I think interpretation a is the strongest, because he came to play such an important role for a large part of the world. Germany eventually had to pay enormous indemnities, which would take many years. He conquered countries, made many countries oppose him, joined alliances and more and more of his own people opposed him. He was and became a very recognized man. (6-9)

In this case, the text refers to the policies of the 1930s and of World War II, as well as Hitler's legacy, as an argument for Hitler's causal importance for 1933, indicating confusion between causes and consequences. This tendency to include later historical events, especially World War II and the Holocaust, occurs in several texts, and may indicate problems with the chosen explanandum: the Nazi regime is so inherently associated with these events that several students struggle with separating them when engaging with the assignment (cf. Barton, 2008; Wendell, 2018). However, cases such as this also indicate that the students producing them are struggling with understanding the concepts of cause and consequence.
These cases indicate that explicit counterfactuals are not necessary for engaging in evaluation of interpretations, but their prevalence in the material indicates that they can be an important scaffolding device for the students.

**Counterfactuals focusing on actors**

Text 6-16 has been categorized as actor-focused, and lacking the possibility of alternate outcomes. The counterfactual argument in the text goes as follows:

I think interpretation A is the best, because Hitler could take power since the people needed a person with a strong drive, and his incredible ability to persuade drove many Germans to believe that he was worthy of their faith /.../ Of course, someone else could have taken his role before Hitler formed history in the way he did. It's not possible to rule out that other men and women had ideas about how they wanted Germany to look that were similar to Hitler's, and would have been ready to seize power. I think the Nazis would seize power anyway, even without Hitler. Of course, it wouldn't have looked exactly the same in history, but it wasn't just Hitler who was involved and influenced people, he had help. (6-16)

The counterfactual manipulation here is the removal of Hitler as a central actor. In that absence, the student reasons that the outcome would have been essentially the same, with the Nazis seizing power. The student hypothesises that there were other potential leaders with the same ideas. In this case, what the counterfactual argument does is to diminish the importance of the individual actor, since the argument is that other candidates were possible and would have yielded the same outcome. The argument does not reinforce structural factors, but rather widens the scope of actors to include (non-specified) actors around Hitler as available substitutes. The counterfactual manipulation thus leads to a reinforcement of the factual development in 1930s Germany.
Another type of reasoning instead suggests an alternate outcome, as exemplified by text 1-2:

Despite the structural aspects, Hitler as an actor was a decisive factor that led to the Nazis seizing power in Germany /.../ On the other hand, the economic and political structure was important in why Hitler could seize power. The parliamentary situation and the effects of the inflation crisis and the stock market crash made people desperate and looking for a solution as fast as possible, and when they saw an engaged leader like Hitler tell about the plans for Germany they were motivated. If it had been another person and not Hitler who took the power, the country would have changed, but not in the way Hitler did. If it hadn't been for Hitler, the Nazis wouldn't have seized power /.../(1-2)

This text, while attributing importance to structural factors, also focuses the counterfactual manipulation on Hitler, hypothetically substituting him with another, non-specified, person. However, in this case, Hitler's is considered so important that such a change would have led to an alternate outcome; the Nazis would then have been unable to seize power. This type of counterfactual argument thus reinforces the importance of the individual actor.

**Counterfactuals focusing on structure**

While most of the student texts address the political, economic, and social situation in interwar Germany, not all of them build a counterfactual argument on hypothetical manipulation of such factors. Text 4-34 is an example of a text focusing only on manipulation of a structural factor. First, the text mentions various actions of Hitler that contributed to his success. Then the reasoning turns:
What rather shows that Hitler was of little importance for him seizing power is, among other things, WW I. Without WW I there would have been no discontent among people, and no one would have had any need for finding someone to hate and blame /.../ So, Hitler wouldn't have been able to gain power unless WW I and its consequences had occurred, since his policies were built on hate. (4-34)

As can be seen, the counterfactual manipulation in this case is about World War One, which is hypothetically removed from the background. As a result, the student argues that many different factors that contributed to Hitler's success would then never have been present. The argument thus indicates awareness of the causal chains connecting World War One and the Nazi seizure of power, and attributes most importance to them. As a consequence, the actions of Hitler and other potential actors appear less important, since they are contingent upon the consequences of World War I.

Manipulating both structure and actor

Some students manipulate both structures and actors counterfactually, something that is probably a result of the nature of the given task. Text 5-22 is a rather elaborate example of this:

To find support for Hitler not being important for the event, we can look at the French revolution 1789. Part of the background of the French Revolution was that France's economy had been damaged by war, and people in the lower classes were affected by, for instance, high bread prices. This was also the case in Germany during the Interwar era /.../ In both cases, the economy was weak as a consequence of war. A difference is that the regime change in France happened through revolution, while Hitler was elected democratically. It does show that regime changes as a consequence of a poor economy due to war can happen without a person
as central as Hitler was for the NSDAP /.../ There are some similarities with the election of Donald Trump in 2016. USA didn't have the same problems that Germany did, but Trump built his rhetoric on MAGA /.../ Mussolini's seizure of power in Italy can be compared to Hitler's, since both built on nationalism /.../

I argue that in this case, Hitler was of great importance to the event. There are innumerable examples of countries in crisis that do not lead to Nazis or similar taking power. The depression struck many countries such as USA, but there it instead led to the New Deal /.../ It isn't at all certain that another person would have had the same impact. Hermann Göring who was second in power in Nazi Germany was certainly popular, but he lacked some abilities of Hitler, such as rhetorical talent, and would probably not have been as important a driving force. Structures are a precondition for actors being able to act with impact, and if Germany and Europe had been stable economically and politically, Hitler's ability wouldn't have been able to make an impact. (5-22)

This text exhibits counterfactual manipulation of both a structure and an actor, the second paragraph cited containing both. Göring is cited as a possible substitute for Hitler, but is found to be less impactful, probably leading to an altered outcome. The second manipulation, removing the economic and political instability, also leads to a probable alternative outcome. The entire argument is supported by several comparisons, where the most elaborate one is between the structural similarities between the French Revolution and the Nazi takeover, which, while acknowledging structural factors as necessary preconditions, still serve to highlight the importance of the individual actor; if not for Hitler, the Nazis would not have seized power. The argument can be compared to that of 1-2 above, making clear that while both texts argue for the importance of the individual actor, text 5-22 makes a much more sophisticated argument by using counterfactuals to test different types of factors, as well as
supporting the argument by comparisons. As compared to text 4-34, the obvious similarity is the conclusion that the actions of Hitler (or another actor) was contingent upon the structural factors, while this text also manages to argue for the necessity of Hitler for the factual outcome.

**Specificity and support**

Counterfactual specificity appears to be most easily accomplished when the counterfactual in question is structural in nature. As Table 3 shows, vague counterfactuals are most common when counterfactuals focus on Hitler, while counterfactuals including structural factors almost always are specific in principle.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Manipulated factor</th>
<th>Vague</th>
<th>Specific</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Specificity of counterfactuals according to manipulated factor

A clear example of a specified actor-counterfactual is given by text 5-22 above, not only specifying Göring as a possible alternative to Hitler, but also citing at least one required ability ('rhetorical talent') necessary. Text 6-16 does not specify alternative persons, but does state what attributes would be necessary for such a person, namely the same ideas as Hitler as well as willingness to seize power, which is why the text has also been categorized as specific. Text 1-2 has been categorized as vague, since no specifics are given about what would have been necessary actions or attributes that were either unique to Hitler or necessary for a potential substitute.
When it comes to texts that include counterfactuals regarding structural factors, the specificity is generally given by the argument focusing on a certain factor or set of factors. Text 4-34 is a clear example of this, placing the emphasis on World War I as the source of all the structural troubles that helped bring about the Nazi seizure of power. The few structure-focused texts that have been categorized as vague rather give a generic picture of what is referred to:

Unless circumstances had been the way they were during that time, things might have gone another way. (1-15)

While such a statement may appear plausible at first sight, it is too vague to say much about.

As regards support by comparison, generalisation, or both, table 4 shows that these methods are not very common, only a total of 32 texts including some use of these.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Manipulated factor</th>
<th>No Support</th>
<th>Support by comparison</th>
<th>Support by generalisation</th>
<th>Support by both</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
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<td>Actor</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Presence of support of counterfactuals

Generalisation only is uncommon in the texts. One of few examples is text 5-7, which includes both structure- and actor-focused counterfactuals. The reasoning goes as follows:

The economic crisis (hyperinflation) led to misery in the country, with unemployment etc. When a country is economically unstable, discontent grows among the inhabitants, which reinforces political extremism /.../ If there hadn't been such a structure, Hitler's party wouldn't
have had as great an impact, and if Hitler as an actor hadn't been able to exploit the structure, the Nazis might not have seized power. (5-7)

The generalisation is expressed in the second sentence of the quote, serving to connect economic factors to political in building up to the counterfactual. The argument takes the form of a more or less universal law stating that economic instability (a structural factor) leads to discontent, which in turn strengthens political extremism. Germany in 1933 appears as an individual case that exemplifies this "law", and by using it, the student supports the argument that Hitler was not as important as the economic situation. Statements of this kind resemble the kinds of generalisations common in social sciences. Their relative sparseness in the material may indicate that the students have learned to be careful with generalisations in history.

While support by generalisation is sparse in the material, support by comparison occurs more frequently, although they are still uncommon: 19 texts include one or more comparisons to support their counterfactual reasoning. These include several different points of comparison, with both time period and places varying. In the texts of one class (from school 1), early 1930s Germany is compared with the situation in Germany about ten years earlier, in the early 1920s. Since the occurrences are concentrated to that class, it probably reflects teaching practices. Other relatively frequent comparisons are done with Sweden (both 1930s and present day), Russia/USSR, and the USA. The comparisons made by the students in this context are by necessity limited in nature, due to the test-like circumstances. Thus the comparisons are overall neither elaborate nor detailed, making it easy to point out deficiencies in the comparisons made. However, the main point of analysing these comparisons is rather to better understand how the students use them to support their reasoning.
One example of comparing Germany in the 1930s with the 1920s is the following:

Without the bad structure, Hitler as an actor wouldn't have mattered much, since there was no reason to change the structure. Hitler had tried to seize power previously, around 1923, but was put in prison. At that time, the structure was much better, there was no economic misery and the people had no reason to turn to the extremes. This can show that Hitler was not that important for the seizure of power in 1933, since he failed to seize power in 1923 but succeeded 10 years later without changing himself significantly. (1-13)

This example highlights both the strengths and weaknesses of this comparative approach. The comparison should satisfy most demands for similarity between cases, with the point of comparison being geographically identical, and the difference in time only 10 years, making it an excellent way of developing an evaluation of Hitler's importance. However, the argument made is flawed, since it is not true that there was 'no economic misery' in Germany in 1923. Presumably, the student has misapplied the concept of 'the roaring twenties' to apply to the entire 1920s, lacking enough knowledge of the historical context. This case thus reinforces the importance of context-sensitivity not just for counterfactuals, but also for comparisons. There are of course students who do not make this mistake, in which case the comparison works better:

To say that the discontent wouldn't have grown without the Nazi propaganda seems far-fetched, since many supported other forms of extremism /.../ Without the discontent resulting from the economic crisis, the Nazis probably wouldn't have become as popular (see the decrease of extremism after the economic support from the US, which strengthened the economy). (5-24)
Other comparisons are close in time to 1933, but instead compare the German situation with that of other countries, most prominently the Soviet Union. These comparisons are often brief, only pointing out some important similarities and differences needed to support the argument made. In the example below, France is the point of comparison:

If the conditions had been different (like for instance in France, where Léon Blum (prime minister) prohibited all fascist organisations and created good conditions for democracy), Hitler wouldn't have seized power in Germany (5-20).

While this argument still can be further qualified, it shows how a comparison can be used to strengthen the counterfactual statement.

*Using both generalisations and comparisons*

In a few cases, texts include both generalisations and comparisons in the counterfactual reasoning. Text 4-22 includes both:

[Those who emphasise structures] argue that the new policies attracted people, no matter who was the leader /.../ However, I think actors are somewhat more important than the structures. The financial crisis at the end of the 2000s [sic] hit many parts of the world hard, including Sweden. Despite this, the government was re-elected. This can have several causes, in crises governments are usually strengthened, as opposed to Germany, which probably was due to the rhetoric of Adolf Hitler. The same happened in Sweden where Fredrik Reinfeldt is a skilled speaker. But during the refugee crisis of 2015, this trend has not held, and the same pattern as in 30s Germany repeats as the people lose confidence in the government, presumably because of an opponent's rhetoric. (4-22)
This is one of the most elaborated comparisons in the material, the student presenting two instances of structural crises in contemporary Sweden, and comparing them, and their varying outcomes, with the German case. The student formulates a generalisation ('in crises governments are usually strengthened'), then notices deviations from this generalisation, and proceeds to explain deviations by the actions of individuals. This all serves as an argument for the counterfactual that if Hitler had not been the leader, the Nazis would not have seized power, supporting the interpretation that Hitler was indeed important.

A simpler form of combination of the two supports is exemplified by the following text:

With all this misery, extremism grew in both directions. The same thing happened during the Russian revolution, a similar thing happened recently in the USA with Trump. When people are discontent they want something new, not necessarily modern. They can certainly appeal to old glory, as long as they represent change /.../ If Germany had been wealthy and people content, they wouldn't have bothered with the stab-in-the-back myth and sought change to the degree they did. (5-3)

In this example, the two comparisons - with the Russian Revolution and the Trump presidency - are not elaborated at all, serving rather as basic supports for the idea that the German case was not unique, but a case of a more general pattern - 'when people are discontent they want something new'. This reasoning forms the basis for the concluding counterfactual, emphasising the importance of the structural factors over actors.

It may be argued that several of the comparisons exemplified here are not really comparisons at all; especially the briefer ones are little more than references or allusions to some other
event or person. This is true, but misses the point: that the presence of these references, undeveloped though they are, indicates that the students do attempt to find points of comparison as a way to strengthen their reasoning. That they are undeveloped follows from the context of the assignment, in which the students have to produce the answers during class, with a definite time limit. That they still make the comparisons indicate a potential for developing this kind of reasoning further if the conditions for producing the answers are changed.

Do these forms of support do anything to make the counterfactual reasoning more qualified? It appears that comparisons are the most obviously useful supports, since they provide at least one other factual occurrence that is used to strengthen the plausibility of the counterfactual reasoning. The actual value of a certain comparison does, however, depend on its specificity. When comparisons are very brief it is more difficult to gauge what they contribute, though their presence at least give some kind of support to the argument. The more elaborate comparisons make stronger arguments, as long as they do not build on false assumptions such as that of 1-13 above. But even in such a case, the use of a comparison indicates a way of thinking about making an argument that is in itself and important qualification, while false assumptions can be addressed in teaching.

The value of generalisations on their own appears more doubtful. Since generalisations are, by definition, general, their main function becomes to provide a link between a certain particular and the counterfactual argument, as in 5-7 above. The obvious way of qualifying a generalisation is to provide more cases that show the generalisation to be valid, or at least cogent. Generalisations thus depend on comparative cases to become valuable. Once more, it can be argued that the mere presence of a generalisation indicates a qualified way of thinking,
but the generalisation in itself at best clarifies an assumption, which then becomes open to scrutiny. The combination of comparison and generalisation thus appears to be a stronger qualification. The examples cited above indicate that it is possible to distinguish further nuances in this approach: while 5-3 only uses comparisons to support the generalisation, which then becomes the premise of the argument, 4-22 both provides examples to support the generalisation, and counterexamples, presenting a more sophisticated argument in the end.

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