

Virtual Ancient History

by L.A. Curchin

If Julius Caesar had been killed in Gaul, would there have been a Roman Empire? What would have happened if Athens had won the Peloponnesian War? These are examples of contrary-to-fact scenarios, or 'counterfactuals'. Once dismissed as a kind of parlour game, counterfactual history, or 'virtual' history as it is now called, has been given fresh legitimacy in a book edited by Niall Ferguson, *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (1997). This collection of essays by some of the top historians in the English-speaking world addresses the question, what would have happened if major events had turned out differently? Since we have no scientific reason to believe that the future is fixed, there is often more than one plausible outcome to a given chain of events. So why did events turn out as they did, and not some other way?

Why should we ask such questions? Why speculate about what didn't happen? Well, pointless as it may seem, we are always asking ourselves counterfactual questions in our everyday lives (would I have got a higher mark if I had studied harder for that exam? what if I hadn't made such a fool of myself at the party?). Those who indulge in war-gaming, whether on a board or on a computer, constantly explore alternative outcomes of battles. Even historians of the ancient world have not been immune to this temptation. In *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon asked what would have happened if the Saracens had conquered Britain. J.B. Bury, famed author of *A History of Greece*, wrote an essay entitled 'Cleopatra's Nose' in which he explored the role of accidents or 'contingencies', such as the shape of Cleopatra's nose, in history. He concluded that 'logical consequences may be facilitated or upset, accelerated or retarded, by contingencies; and it is this which makes history so interesting' (Bury, *Select Essays*, p. 68). *A History of Rome*, by M. Cary and H.H. Scullard (1975), also poses some counterfactuals. Concerning the responsibility of Rome and Carthage for the First Punic War, we are told, 'Had either of them, instead of attempting to steal a march upon the other, made an offer of fresh negotiations, a durable compromise should not have been difficult to arrange' (p. 117). With regard to Tiberius Gracchus' land bill, we read, 'If Tiberius had followed the established practice of submitting bills to the Senate before presenting them to the Popular Assembly, it is by no means certain that his agrarian measures would have been flatly rejected by the nobles' (p. 204).

Apart from curiosity and idle speculation, we have good reason to think about the 'what-ifs' of history. Imagining a parallel, 'virtual' world, in which the outcome of events is different, and comparing that with what actually happened, helps us understand that nothing is predetermined or inevitable. We therefore need to ask ourselves, why did things turn out as they did, instead of another way? Greg Woolf begins his book *Becoming Roman* (1998) by asking what would have happened if the Roman Empire had had no cultural impact on the inhabitants of the provinces. He imagines a counterfactual scenario where 'the day to day rhythm of their lives is unchanged, they speak the same languages as before, worship the same gods, inhabit the same houses and eat the same foods....And when the empire withers away or collapses...all is exactly as it was and no traces of it remain' (p. ix). Woolf's point is that we should not accept as inevitable the Romanization of the provinces; we need to ask, why were they forever changed by the Roman experience?

Why should we believe that there are other possible worlds than the one we live in? A good reason is provided by David Lewis: 'It is uncontroversially true that things might be

otherwise than they are. I believe, and so do you, that things could have been different in countless ways' (Counterfactuals, 1973, p. 84). Since we believe that there are alternative ways that things could have happened, yet those are not the ways that events actually unfolded in our world, then those alternatives must have existed in some other world. What is not real in our world may be real in a parallel world.

A basic question in counterfactual studies is, if we were to change one event in the chain, would the result have been different? There are many situations where this would probably have been the case. If the Persians had won the battle of Marathon, or Hannibal had marched on Rome after the battle of Cannae, some major wars might have ended very differently. In other cases, changing one factor in the equation does not substantially alter the outcome. Suppose Augustus had died from his serious illness in 25 BC: would the course of history have been changed? Let's play out this scenario. Marcus Agrippa, Augustus' designated successor, would have kept the empire running until his death in 12 BC. Since Agrippa's sons were still minors, Augustus' widow Livia would then have exerted her formidable influence to install her own son Tiberius as emperor. Since, in real life, Tiberius became emperor after Augustus, the counterfactual result would not have been radically different; Tiberius would simply have had a longer reign. True, some of the smaller details may have turned out differently. Augustus' famed social legislation might never have been introduced; on the other hand, Tiberius as emperor might have prevented the Varian disaster of AD 9.

Counterfactuals, Ferguson insists, are not mere fantasy: they are 'simulations based on calculations about the relative probability of plausible outcomes in a chaotic world' (p. 85). As such, they are a valid historical exercise that forces us to ask why things happened as they did, and not in some other way. Counterfactuals could be used to good advantage in the classroom, in the form of an oral debate or written assignment, to give students a new perspective on history by exploring what might have happened if things had been different.