COUNTERFACTUALS AND FAKES

– the implications of the question “what if … ?”

The ancient historians Ian Morris and Walter Scheidel are two colleagues of mine at Stanford.

“Who killed Harry Field?”

Ian sees himself as a social scientist of the ancient world – building models of

how antiquity worked, models that are general enough to apply beyond antiquity. He is, for example, convinced that the real story behing the bronze and iron age in the Mediterranean – from the third through first millennium BC – is one of economic growth on the basis of a particular organization of production (encompassing class culture, division of labor and the particulars of farmed species). All the cultural trappings, though these are often the focus of attention, are, for Ian, secondary and simply followed in the wake of economic growth. Walter is a smart socio-biologist. His big picture of antiquity is one of population and demographics, epidemiology, subsistence and reproductive behaviors. The Roman Empire? A way of ensuring the reproductive success of a class minority.

Ian and Walter have a favorite question they pitch at someone who presents a new cultural interpretation of some aspect of antiquity. Let's say we are in a seminar about ancient libraries and how they were part of an upper class culture that celebrated the gift of a facility to one's community, a play upon public and private in the performance of reading and declamation, the manipulation of architectural form around façade, inscription, and references to the family of the funding donor. And that this is all wrapped up in urban design – the experience of walking down a street in a Greek city under Roman rule in Asia Minor, the coast of modern Turkey.

Such an interpretation makes sense by connecting different observations of the way libraries vary from city to city, and what we know about the people who built and used them.

Ian and Walter's question starts with asking for what they call a "counterfactual". By this they mean "if it was different …". Their question is "given a counterfactual case (if it were different, if libraries were a proletarian resistenace to upper class rule, for example), how would this change your interpretation?". What they really mean is "how can we test your ideas?". It is certainly the case that a lot of things that make sense are not testable – it is difficult to think of how to verify or falsify them. For example, it makes sense to think that the things people use have a lot to do with identity – how they see themselves. It might prove very difficult to test such an idea securely – not least because of a cirularity built into such interpretations – what people do is, arguably, always governed by who they think they are – so how could it be proved otherwise? Then there is the matter of archaeological and historical evidence –

often very flimsy and fragmentary – very inconclusive.

So Ian and Walter, admirably, want us to present robust and testable ideas. But it does mean they are very broad and simple things that seem to miss out on what we think life is about. Ian and Walter do sometimes seem to think only in terms of grand impersonal forces like the environment, biology, the economy – because we have ways of measuring these. (How do you measure a sense of self, or identity? Even if it does matter to most people.)

Ian and Walter are unashamedly positivist – they want to build positive knowledge – knowledge of the past that is applicable to the present in the form of law-like generalizations about history.

Tonight we were watching a classics Morse episode. Morse – the British detective in Oxford who loves beer and culture and drives round in a red Mark II Jaguar. “Who Killed Harry Field?”

It too is about a counterfactual.

Now Ian and Walter are using the term in a particular way that is a little unimaginative. They are interested in tying facts tightly to ideas. But other uses of the term are less up-tight. Niall Ferguson, the modern historian, has edited a book, Virtual History that looks at what might have happened if … Hitler had invaded Britain in WWII, if Kennedy hadn’t been assasinated … .

Speculative maybe. But David Lewis has presented a wonderful philosophical position on possible other worlds – for the existence of multiple realities, or at least that it is useful and enlightening to think of counterfactuals, contrary-to-fact conditionals, “what if?” scenarios.

What if the Renaissance artist Giovanni Bellini, (1430?-1516) had met his younger German contemporary Albrecht Dürer (b. May 21, 1471, Imperial Free City of Nürnberg, d. April 6, 1528, Nürnberg), and Dürer had painted Bellini?

This Morse episode plays on this scenario. The enchanting possibility of the likelihood of such a meeting producing a masterpiece motivates Harry Field snr, a restorer of works of art, to fake the painting – convincingly. And his fake painting eventually leads to the death of his son.

The speculation of “what if … ?”

No up tight regulation about facts and testability here. What if Dürer had painted Bellini? Real effects – a murder. Want to test for that?

What I realized is that this is the motivation behind the positivist worry about counterfactuals. The worry is all about the theme of this Morse episode – fakes.

Ian and Walter are worried about fakes. Fake pasts. But their appropriate insistence upon thinking about counterfactuals misses the crucial and creative point that history is all about things that didn't happen. Why are counterfactuals important? Not because they make us more up tight about the available facts, but because people are always thinking what if …? And this matters – it changes history. Try proving that!