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Thesis in Fulfillment of the Midway Honors Program
East Tennessee State University:

**Historically Informed Prediction That Will Not Lead to
Historicism: A Theory of Counterfactual Construction**

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Undergraduate Senior Midway Honors Thesis

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Introduction

What is the purpose of the study of history? Do we study history so that we can predict¹ the future? If so, what should we be looking for in our inquiry, which will give us the knowledge and ability to predict the future? Many have seen history as serving this purpose. An advocate of this approach, Karl Marx, would lead us to the search and study of inevitable laws that guide the course of history. This is the core doctrine of historicism, which is described as,

“...an approach to the social sciences which assumes that historical prediction is their principle aim, and which assumes that this aim is attainable by discovering the ‘rhythms’ or the ‘patterns’, the ‘laws’ or the ‘trends’ that underlie the evolution of history” (Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, 3).

This paper is a rejection of Historicism, and its approach to history. I will use Karl Popper to reject the methods of Historicism on two grounds. The first being, the less controversial objection of, there are no inevitable historical laws, like those present in Karl Marx’s historical materialism. The second being, a more controversial objection of, it is impossible based solely on logical reason, to make any scientific historical prediction. After Popper made his objections to Historicism “...it is widely believed that...(Popper)...wreaked irrevocable damage on this doctrine” (Urbach 1). Most will agree with the first, less controversial, objection to historicism, but what about the

¹ Predict in the Marxian sense of knowledgeably making truth claims about the ‘course’ and ‘rhythms’ of history and what the future holds.

second controversial one? Is this really the case and if so, is this the desired outcome? Do we not use a type of historical prediction every day? Isn't historical prediction a necessary and functional part of our everyday lives? What about the use of counterfactuals? Counterfactuals are projections made based on the study of similar past situations and are used frequently in policy making decisions. What is wrong with these types of probabilistic hypotheses? I will argue that it is the case we do pragmatically and necessarily use historical prediction on a daily basis.

Popper has done great work in his rejection of the doctrines of Historicism but, I propose that he was overzealous and went too far in his rejections. We do not want to completely reject to the ability to use prediction in every case. Popper was writing when Communism was flourishing throughout the world, therefore, rightly so, he was worried about people laying claim to knowledge of historical laws, which gives them the power to predict the future, then abusively using this obtained power for their own political interest. But as I stated, I feel he was too zealous in his rejection of predictions informed through historical knowledge. Therefore, I will propose a construction of a Semi-Popperian theory of counterfactual projection that is pragmatic, but does not claim to be a truth or necessity, unlike the laws of Marx's historical materialism. The first section of this paper will focus on Popper's rejection of historicism, namely its appeal to historical 'laws' discoverable in society. In the next section, I will ask, does Popper's theory lead us into a position of not being able to make historically based predictions or counterfactuals, which seems counterintuitive and unrealizable in real-

world decision making². If it is the case that we do make predictions to guide future actions then we must have an objective criterion in which we use to do so. This leads me into my last section where I will propose a type of Semi-Popperian theory of counterfactual projection. In doing so, I am keeping Popper's rejection of inevitable laws underlying history but still allowing the use of historical projection, by adding an objective criterion that allows us to make pragmatic and non-arbitrary action guiding projections.

Section I: Popper's Rejection of Historicism

As stated, the first section will focus on Popper's rejection of Historicism. Popper is esteemed for dismantling the philosophical arguments constructed and proposed by the fascist and communist beliefs. In his dedication of *The Poverty of Historicism* Popper states, "In memory of the countless men and women of all creeds or nations or races who fell victims to the fascist and communist belief in Inexorable Laws and Historical Destiny" (Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, V). Popper was adamant about the termination of the doctrine of Historicism because he believed that it had given rise to some of the most evil and detrimental of dogmas. Popper felt, "Historicism...is not just an intellectual error, of interest of professional philosophers; it is a prime source of moral and political devastation" (Passmore 1). This was exactly what Marx wanted, not in the negative sense that Popper paints but in a positive sense,

² On the individual everyday scale and the collective scale, such as, states, nations, and even international governing bodies.

in that, he truly believed he had found the moral and political keys to human emancipation. Marx never desired theoretical and intellectual separatism, but sought an engaging intellectual pragmatism. In his *Theses on Feuerbach* he writes,

“All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice....The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it” (Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, 173).

Marx sincerely felt, through philosophical and historical research, he could lay bare historical laws that could be intellectually understood, and used to predict the future which would enable human emancipation. Popper does not attack the ends of Marx project (emancipation) he attacks Marx's means to the end, namely Historicism. Popper admits there is a humanitarian appeal to the works of Marx, “...there can be no doubt of the humanitarian impulse of Marxism....Marx made an honest attempt to apply rational methods to the most urgent problems of social life...all modern writers are indebted to Marx” (Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, 82). Popper understood, and identified with, the ends that Marx was trying to realize, but the problem was the Historicist's infected method in which Marx went about trying to achieve this end.

Now that I have briefly laid out the Historicist's method and Popper's attitude towards it, I will consider the two objections that Popper offers against Historicism. Again the definition of Historicism is, “...an approach to the social sciences which assumes that historical prediction is their principle aim, and which assumes that this aim

is attainable by discovering the ‘rhythms’ or the ‘patterns’, the ‘laws’ or the trends’ that underlie the evolution of history” (Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, 3). The first less controversial³ objection is there are no inevitable historical laws guiding the course of history in which we can know and use in historical prediction. The Historicist claims to have discovered laws, through historical scientific research, in which he can use to predict and know the future. Marx, as a historicist, claims to have discovered “the history” that we should study to enable the unearthing of the hidden “laws” of this history. In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx states, “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, 246). This is history for Marx. This is all that is needed for examination to understand the past, exist in the present, and know the future. Marx account of history can be considered a reductionist account of history⁴ and is exactly what Popper objects to. Popper is objecting to the discovery of law based on research in history by arguing that the Historicist’s, here namely Marx, account of history is no account of history at all, but only a selection or slice. Popper argues there is no history of mankind. He argues for

³ The stronger and weaker thesis format of Popper’s objection is put forth by Herbert Keuth in his exposition *The Philosophy of Karl Popper* in which he states, “Popper’s basic thesis says ‘that the *doctrine of a historical necessity* is and will remain sheer superstition, even though it proceeds to be ‘scientific’, and that the course of history cannot be rationally predicted’ (EH, VII, m.t.) Strictly he seems to be advocating two theses. According to the first, weaker thesis, the – strong – statement that there are *historical laws that inevitably* force a certain course of history is sheer superstition. Such a superstition may be found in *Marx’s historical materialism*. According to the second, stronger thesis, *the course of history cannot be scientifically predicted at all* not even by means of – weaker – probabilistic hypotheses...he claims to defiantly refuted historicism” (200-201).

⁴ Popper felt that a history of mankind is an impossibility. There are a number of infinite facts to collect and we never could do an adequate job and “What people have in mind when they speak of the history of mankind is, rather, the history of the Egyptian, Babylonian, Persian, Macedonian, and Roman empires, and so on, down to our day. In other words: The speak about the history of mankind, but what they mean, and what they have learned about in school, is the *history of political power*” (Popper *The Open Society and It’s Enemies*, 270).

this by showing that our description of all collected historical information, and any information, is selective⁵. He states,

“The reason why all description is selective is, roughly speaking, the infinite wealth and variety of the possible aspects of the facts of our world...thus we may describe as long as we like our description will always be incomplete, a mere selection, and a small one at that, of the facts that present themselves for description....A concrete history of mankind, if there were any, would have to be the history of all men. It would have to be the history of all human hopes, struggles, and sufferings. For there is no one man more important than any other. Clearly, this concrete history cannot be written. We must make abstractions, we must neglect, select” (Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, 261,270).

Popper continues with the claim that the generalizing sciences⁶ search for general laws, in which, to construct theories to use as a frame for their research. But in the historical sciences there are no general laws which can be used to construct general theories that

⁵ A similar objection comes from Dr. Kamolnick, professor of sociology, in which, he states concerning Marx’s reductionist account of history, “Marx’s presents an extremely reductionist account of history – ‘the history of all hitherto existing history is the history of class struggle’. This massive inflation of class struggle and diminution of other potentially relevant variables, e.g. sex human reproductive sexuality, race, ethnicity, and religion; geography and climate; nationalism; other sources of human conflict, violence, war, and territorial motivation, renders Marx’s theory incapable of capturing many of the actual social dynamics of the contemporary world” (Marx’s *Theory of Social Change*, 4). This is not in support of Popper’s idea of selectivism, but does serve to show the poverty of the Historicist reductionist theory.

⁶ Popper makes the distinction between generalizing sciences and historical sciences. For Popper the historical sciences “...have...interest in specific events and in their explanation may, in contradiction to the generalizing sciences, be called the *historical science*....Generalization belongs simply to a different line of interest, sharply to be distinguished for that interest in specific events and their causal explanation which is the business of history” (Popper, *Open Society and its Enemies*, 264).

can be used to choose and organize facts. Popper explains we do use points of view to organize facts, which might resemble universal laws, like economics, politics, or class struggle but these are not universal laws but are the problems, issues, or themes that we see history through. Looking at history through a point of view is inevitable, as Popper himself states,

“A point of view is inevitable; and the naïve attempt to avoid it can only lead to self-deception, and to the uncritical application of an unconscious point of view. All this is true, most emphatically, in the case of *historical description*, with its infinite subject matter....Thus in history no less than in science, we cannot avoid a point of view; and the belief that we can must lead to self deception and to lack of critical care” (Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* Vol. II, 261).

Therefore, in concern to Popper’s first objection to historicism, we have seen that there are no historical laws to be uncovered through the study of history. Popper’s objection is based on the critique of the Historicist’s account of history, specifically Marx, and his history of mankind, which is, the history of class struggle. Popper objects by showing that all compiled and sought out histories of mankind are selections. They are inevitably selections because of the infinite wealth of information, number of aspects, and interpretations while doing historical research. Secondly, there may be ways in which we formulate or structure our study of history but these are not laws, as found in the generalizing sciences, but they are simply points of view. Man will always have a point of view when approaching the study of history. The point is not to terminate or escape

that point of view, which Popper would say is impossible, but to realize that there is a point of view and proceed to study history in that fashion. The problem lies with those who claim not have a selective point of view and therefore claim they have discovered the history of mankind and seek to derive laws from this history. In other words, the Historicist blindly proceeds making grandiose predictions and calling people to act based on those predictions. The Historicist unwillingness to realize that they will always have a point of view and will have never have considered the whole of history, sets him up for narrow-mindedness and disaster. This is popper's first, less controversial, objection to Historicism, next I shall proceed to the second more controversial objection.

In his second claim Popper states that the course of history cannot be scientifically predicted at all. Not only are there no laws or patterns guiding the course of history but actually we cannot scientifically predict anything in the future based on historical knowledge. He claims, "I have shown that, for strictly logical reasons, it is impossible for us to predict the future course of history" (Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, IX). His argument is as follows:

- (1) "The course of human history is strongly influenced by the growth of human knowledge. (The truth of this premise must be admitted even by those who see in our ideas, including our scientific ideas, merely the by-products of *material* developments if some kind or other.)

- (2) We cannot predict, by rational or scientific methods, the future growth of our scientific knowledge. (This assertion can be logically proved...)
- (3) We cannot, therefore, predict the future course of human history.
- (4) This means that we must reject the possibility of a *theoretical history*; that is to say, of a historical social science that would correspond to *theoretical physics*. There can be no scientific theory of historical development serving as a basis for historical prediction.
- (5) The fundamental aim of historicist methods is therefore misconceived; and historicism collapses" (Popper, Poverty of Historicism, IX,X)

The key lies in claim number two. Popper goes on to say, "If there is such a thing as growing human knowledge, then we cannot anticipate today what we shall know only tomorrow" (Popper, Poverty of Historicism, X). In other words, our knowledge is continuing to grow so theories that claim they have arrived at the end result of our knowledge or history are impossible. We are not static factors like in a chemistry experiment which that can be controlled and measured, are knowledge is dynamic and is growing and changing daily. But Popper does state that not all prediction is ruled out, "...it only refutes the possibility of predicting historical developments to the extent to which they may be influenced by the growth of our knowledge" (Popper, Poverty of Historicism, X). He does say his argument "...is perfectly compatible with the possibility

of testing social theories – for example, economic theories – by way of predicting that certain developments will take place under certain conditions” (Popper, Poverty of Historicism, X). But he feels,

“...if there is such a thing as growing human knowledge, then we cannot anticipate today what we shall know only tomorrow...no scientific predictor – whether a human scientist or a calculating machine – can possibly predict, by scientific methods, its own future results. Attempts to do so can attain their result only after an event, when it is too late for a prediction; they can attain their results only after the prediction has turned into a retrodiction” (Popper Poverty of Historicism, XI).

Popper is making the strong claim that we are not able to make any claims about the future that involve things that would be affected by our knowledge. This claim is coming from his continued rejection of historical prediction. He claims that social systems are dynamic and we cannot know the future change they will go through, and we cannot use future prediction based upon them because they need to be static in order to do that. He explains his point by using the solar system;

“The point of considerable importance in connection with the claims of Historicism, in so far as the success of the long term predictions of astronomy depends entirely on this repetitive, and in the sociologist’s sense static, character of the solar system – on the fact that we may here and symptoms of a historical development. It is therefore certainly a mistake to suppose that these dynamic long term predictions of a

stationary system establish the possibility of large-scale historical prophecies of non-stationary social systems” (Popper Poverty of Historicism, 113)

We cannot use our current knowledge to predict the future of social systems because they are not static like the solar system in astronomy. Our social systems are continuing to morph and develop along with our knowledge therefore, it is impossible to predict historical developments to the extent which they may be influenced by the growth of our knowledge. As humans, we are the actors in the social systems and we cause it to morph and develop because of our growing knowledge. In light of this, if we reflect back to Marx we can see the stark contrast and disagreement between him and Popper. Marx tried to gain a holistic knowledge of history by reducing it down to the struggles of social classes, so that, he could claim this knowledge and use it to predict the future direction of human social and political progression. Popper disagrees with him on two points. First, Marx’s reductionist account of history is a wrong and incomplete understanding of what history is and secondly, we cannot do any predicting in concern to things which are effected by our growing knowledge, therefore we cannot make social and political predictions because these systems are not static and will be greatly affected by our knowledge in the future.

In conclusion of the first section, I hoped to have sufficiently explained Popper’s refutation of Historicism through one of its key proponents, Karl Marx. Popper understood that Marx had the noble goal of human emancipation and credits Marx for some of his work but completely rejects the methods in which he employs. Popper rejects Marx on

two grounds. The first is the rejection of discoverable historical laws or keys that can be used to predict and wholly know the future. The second is a rejection of any future prediction of social systems and their growth, except for those with controllable factors, because they are affected by our growing knowledge which makes them dynamic and evolving. Popper completely dismantles Marx's proposition of discoverable laws but his second argument, in which he employs against Historicism, is a bit more controversial and possibly false. In the next section, I will take a closer look at Popper's second claim and will look at possible examples of pragmatic social predictions based on past historical knowledge.

Section II: Examples of Valid Historically Based Predictions

As stated earlier, according to Popper we cannot do any predicting in concern to things which are affected by our growing knowledge, therefore we cannot make predictions because these systems will be greatly affected by our knowledge in the future. So, we should not make historically informed decisions, but we do it all the time, specifically when nation states and other governing bodies make policies and militaristic decisions. It even seems that we use historical prediction every day when encountering the most basic of situations and problems. In others words, it seems that historically based prediction is an extremely pragmatic and functional part of human reasoning and life. In this section, I will look at some simple examples of historically informed predictions and also some more complex examples. It is the job of this section to

demonstrate how we do use historical prediction and show that it is a necessary, pragmatic, and functional part of human reasoning.

There are many areas that we use historically informed prediction but the specific type of prediction I will consider is the use of counterfactuals. Counterfactuals can be described as, the tendency we have to imagine or predict future possible outcomes to an event rather than the actual outcome. Take for example the event of a car accident. A person involved in such an accident could think of an array of different possibilities to have avoided the accident such as; what if I wasn't speeding in the rain then my car would not have skidded off the road. Therefore, the next time that person approaches the same curvy and rainy driving situation they will use their past counterfactual thinking to prevent the event from happening again. This is a necessary and functional part of human life. Another simple example would be someone getting fired from their job. After the fact, one could think of many ways in which to avoid being fired, such as, what if I had not been late; what if I had not said those things to my boss; what if I had meet that deadline for the numbers my boss wanted? People use these experiences and thought experiments to better plan and predict for analogous situations in the future. Counterfactuals are a type of historically informed prediction which benefits us. But according to Popper, this would be a logically invalid course of reason, as shown above, due to the inevitability of the growth of future knowledge, which would be an unaccounted variable in the predicted outcome.

Keeping this in mind I would like to consider some more complex counterfactual examples which by their exploration and implementation seem to be beneficial to us.

Secondly, I will consider some counterfactual examples considering international security choices. The first example I would like to consider is a study entitled, *The Future of Human Life Expectancy: Have We Reached the Ceiling or is the Sky the Limit*. In this study the researchers are seeking to understand, by the study of history, what the future life expectancy of humans will be and to place confidence bounds around it.

They state,

“Nonetheless, a full understanding of the forces driving mortality decline still eludes us, and the future path of technophysio evolution is uncertain.

The goal of modern mortality forecasting is not only to identify

underlying age patterns and trends, but also to quantify this

uncertainty—to place confidence bounds around it” (Sonnega 3).

Here we see the goal of historical prediction is forecasting, predicting, and to place confidence bounds around the future, particularly in this study the future of life expectancy. Also they use counterfactual assumptions based on the research of historical data. They state, “Based on historical trends, the model assumes that the aggregate effect of all the factors that have shaped mortality in the past will continue at the same rate in the future” (Sonnega 2). Also the article shows the possible benefits of such research, as it states,

“Support for this type of research is increasingly important, since improved projections of life expectancy—which give us some idea of the future size of the elderly population—are key in informed planning for the allocation of public and private resources” (Sonnega 1).

As we can see through this example there are explicit uses of historical information in order to produce counterfactual research, which, can be used for the benefit of humanity. Popper would object to this research on two grounds; 1.) More factors than the ones considered can be taken into account, like the possibility of war, lack of resources, natural disasters and more, in other words it is a reductionist account. 2.) The article is also making historically informed predictions. Popper claims we are unable to do this, correctly, because we do not know the growth of human knowledge in the future, which could lead us to things such as a cure for cancer or for the HIV virus. Even in light of Popper's points it still seems beneficial for mankind for this type of research and prediction to be carried out.

Secondly, I would like to consider another example of counterfactual historically based prediction. The example entails the international reality of the necessary defense of nations through militaristic action. The example I consider comes from the book, *China: Fragile Superpower: How China's Internal Politics Could Derail Its Peaceful Rise*. In the beginning the author, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State responsible for China during the Clinton administration, plays out the situation where a Chinese and Taiwanese jet fighter crashed into each other and she considers the ramifications between China, Taiwan, and the United States.

"The Pentagon just informed that a Chinese SU-27 jet fighter and a Taiwanese F-16 jet fighter have collided in the Taiwan Strait.' My heart sinks. I have heard that the military aircraft patrolling the narrow body of water between the island of the Taiwan and the Chinese mainland fly

dangerously close to one another, despite U.S. warning to both sides.

'What about the pilots?' I ask. 'Have they bailed out? Been rescued?'

'We don't know yet,' says the Op Center voice. 'Has either side made a public statement? Or communicated with us? Have we seen any military from either side?' 'No information yet, ma'am. But CNN is just reporting it now.' I dash to my car and speed back to the state department, using the moments calm before entering the storm of the crisis to make a plan.

What should our government do to prevent the accident triggering a war between China and Taiwan – and vey likely drawing in the United States?

I play through various scenarios, and they all have one common thread. If CNN is broadcasting the news of the crash, it is sure to be picked up and spread by the interest in China before the Communist Party censors can block it out. And once the news is public, China's leaders will feel compelled by the pressure of public opinion to react forcefully.

(Author speaking) Envisioning the scenario as it unfolds, when I reach my office in the State Department, I learn that president Hu Jintao has already appeared on China Central Television:...

Following the pattern of previous crises, the Chinese leaders have immediately framed the situation as an international attack on China and boxed themselves in a corner. Now how will they prove their determination to defend the national honor against this "deliberate provocation?" ...After consulting with the secretary of state, I call the

National Security Council staff. We agree that the president should immediately telephone China's president to urge him not to mobilize the military or to make any public threats against Taiwan. Forget about using the Foreign Ministry channel. We have to get straight to China's top leader, who will be feeling the heat internationally as well as domestically. And only our president can reach their president. For our part we will intercede with the Taiwan government and ask it not to mobilize its military forces and to return the Mainland crew promptly. It is too late. American Intelligence reports that China has mobilized not only its regular military forces but also its internal security forces. Angry Chinese students are swarming into Beijing's Tiananmen Square and the central squares of other Chinese cities, shouting, 'Down with the Taiwan separatist!' Some in the crowds carry hastily made signs saying, 'Down with the American-loving Chinese Communist Party toadies!' and 'When will China finally stand up?'" (Shirk 1-3).

The author states, "The scene is hypothetical, but it is not a fantasy. Crises like this have happened in the past and can happen in the future" (Shirk 3). The situation is counterfactual, in that, it did not actually happen, but it has in the past and could in the future where she is considering the possible outcomes. Her book is filled with hypothetical situation similar to this one. She considers another concerning the struggle of North and South Korea, plus China and the United States unavoidable involvement in the possible conflict. These scenes are extremely hypothetical and non-factual. But

they use language such as “based on the past” and “following the pattern of previous crises” all of which are examples of historically informed prediction.

These types of propositions are extremely helpful and pragmatic for everyday life and more importantly states policy making. As we have seen in the examples above, counterfactuals can be extremely helpful when making choices and they seem to be necessarily functional and pragmatic for human life. But just as stated earlier, this type of counterfactual thinking and prediction is unreliable and useless according to Popper because we do not know the possible available knowledge and circumstances cultivated by human action. These unaccounted factors can greatly affect the ways things will unfold in the future.

Many consider Popper a philosophical hero for demolishing the seemingly legitimizing philosophies of many authoritarian regimes. I, along with others, do understand Popper’s worry, as he sees the danger of authoritarian governments using history to convince the people that based on their historical knowledge they are able to predict the future. I feel, Popper, rightfully so, is extremely worried about people who claim they know history and now can confidently and accurately predict future. He has shown how this can be dangerous. People will abusively use this “historical knowledge” as propaganda to promote their agendas and also as justifications of their agendas.

Therefore, Popper has succeeded in his attempt of destroying the core Historicist doctrines but in doing so has left us in two camps. If we don’t agree with Popper we are in the Historicist camp, which states we can have complete and accurate knowledge of the future based on discoverable historical laws. Or we are in the second

camp and embrace the claim that Popper's arguments seem to direct us to, that we can have no knowledge of the future therefore, we should not try to use historically based predictions. But, as I have shown, we do use prediction as knowledge for making decisions about the future. Therefore, the objection is raised to Popper; did he go too far when he claimed the inability of any historically informed prediction that could be affected by our growing human knowledge? I believe, and have tried to show that, we can make historically informed counterfactual predictions and agree with Michael Allen when he states, "Counterfactually-based historical predictions are inferences to the best available explanation of what the future is likely to hold...it (counterfactually-based historical predictions) is pragmatically action-guiding with respect to future uncertainties" (Allen 10). Therefore, I disagree with Popper and feel it is possible and necessary to suggest⁷ counterfactual predictions based on historical experience.

Section III: Semi-Popperian Theory of Projection Making

As stated earlier, I do feel historically informed predictions are necessary, pragmatic, and functional for humans therefore, I would like to propose a Semi-Popperian theory that uses counterfactually based historical projections. Similar to Popper, I agree that the historical laws proposed by Historicist are completely false and unknowable. But unlike Popper, I do feel that we do, and can, functionally use historical knowledge of past events in order to make pragmatic judgments and projections about

⁷ I use suggest to contrast the Historicist's vocabulary of 'claim' or 'to know.'

the future. My theory of counterfactually based historical projections has three main attitudes that help us to stray away from the kind of philosophy Popper was worried about. I propose a dynamic, informative, and diverse historically informed theory of prediction. In this section, I would like to lay out the three main attitudes of my theory. Then I will proceed to lay out a criterion, in which, we can evaluate more or less plausible counterfactuals which can be used as legitimate historically informed prediction.

First, I would like to look at the dynamic aspect of my theory. It is dynamic, in that, there is always room for flexibility and change. The theory is not concerned with static prediction, such as, unchanging historical laws like the the Historicist uses. Secondly, it is informative, as opposed to descriptive, because descriptive implies knowing. We should try and be informed of future possibilities but never claim a complete knowledge of what the future holds. This is the difference between projection and prophecy. Thirdly, it is diverse, in that we try, as much as possible, not be reductionist in our research. Popper does claim that no matter how hard we try we will always have a point of view but we must proceed realizing this and never claim to have considered all possibilities. We must begin any historically informed decision making committed to these three attitudes. This is critical in order not to fall into the trap of Historicism. Briefly, I would like to make some comparisons in concern to historical determinism and my theory of counterfactually-based historical projections in order to clearly show the differences of the theory I am proposing and Historicism. Here is a list of the differences between the two:

Historical Determinism	Counterfactually-Based Historical Projections
Implies Knowing	Simply Projecting
Laws (static)	Suggestions (dynamic)
Singularity	Diverse
Power	Humility/Respect
Closed	Open
Action-forcing	Action-guiding
Authoritarian	Democratic

My project now is to form a criterion based on dynamic, informative, and diverse characteristics, with which, one can make non-arbitrary and legitimate predictions. If I cannot do this, “then the whole exercise starts to look hopelessly subjective, circular, and non-falsifiable. What is to stop us from simply inventing counterfactual outcomes that justify out political bias and predilections?” (Tetlock and Belkin 38). Or I could be left as a skeptic of historical predictions and will not be able to confidently make choices between more or less plausible counterfactuals. Therefore, I must answer the question, how can we objectively make choices between legitimate and not legitimate counterfactuals? In other words, the skeptic might say, ok it is necessary that I make future predictions but I can predict many events, which one should I choose? Based on Poppers argument against Historicism, and the direction that it leads us, we cannot follow an, if A then B, mindset when approaching prediction or counterfactual thinking. Let me use an example to play this out. Let’s say that North Korea’s new supreme

leader Kim Jong Un makes the statement, “Now that we have nuclear capabilities are going to try and unite the Korean peninsula. We have nothing to lose and if anyone in the international community tries to stop us we will take the necessary measures needed to ultimately accomplish our goal!” Does it follow that he will do this (If A then B)? If we look to history and say upon my research, YES he will do this because of the many examples of this happening in the past (Option B). Or we could also say, no he will not do this, these statements are just Kim Jong Un attempting to establish himself as the new totalitarian leader of North Korean regime and this statement is just more rhetoric of the dictatorship that we have seen from the past (Option C). Using this example we can see that we cannot always follow the historically informed, if A then B pattern, because of the also historically informed C option and other possible options.



Therefore, there needs to be an action guiding criterion, with which, we can chose the most plausible of these counterfactual predictions. We cannot appeal to any laws of the past, as Popper has shown us, but there must be some way that we can distinguish between the more plausible counterfactual predictions from the less plausible ones. Popper does not refute, as stated earlier, “the possibility of every kind of social prediction; on the contrary, it is perfectly compatible with the possibility of testing social

theories – for example, economic theories – by way of predicting that certain developments will take place under certain conditions” (Popper, Poverty of Historicism, X). But here I am not talking about social theories. I am talking about individual political decision making, mainly the choices that we are faced with in state policy options and militaristic courses of action.

In light of these concerns, I will now layout the criterion, with which, I feel counterfactuals must be evaluated. In doing this, I am answering to the worry of the skeptic who says, aren’t all counterfactuals equally valid or how can you choose between one counterfactual over the other? In other words, how can you escape the subjectivism of which should be used in counterfactual prediction making. While answering the skeptics’ question one must realize that there is some room for freedom and disagreement but “It would be a big mistake to confuse epistemic pluralism (which we accept up to a point) with an anything-goes subjectivism (which we reject and which would treat all counterfactual claims as equally valid in their own way)” (Tetlock and Belkin 16).

Before I layout the four constraints I would like mention that the ideas and formation of these constraints comes from the book *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics*, and specifically the chapter by Philip E. Tetlock and Aaron Belkin, entitled, *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics: Logical, Mythological, and Psychological Perspectives*. Now, I will proceed to layout and explain my four constraints when producing plausible counterfactuals. The first type is logical constraints. There are two specific logical constrains that should be focused on when

constructing counterfactuals. The first, proposes “...like actual experiments, thought experiments should manipulate one cause at a time, thereby isolating pathways of influence” (Tetlock and Belkin 19). The approach that I advocate is termed the “...strike model of counterfactual inference...” (Tetlock and Belkin 20). This approach originates from James D. Fearon. He proposes,

“As a pragmatic rule of evidence, that we seriously consider only those counterfactuals in which the antecedent seems likely to affect the specified consequent and very little else. This argument invokes a surgical- strike model of counterfactual inference in which we not only manipulate one thing at a time, we give priority attention to those causes specifically relevant to the consequent of interest” (Tetlock and Belkin 21).⁸

Therefore, just as a surgeon is concern about the objects affecting the specific interest the counterfactual inference taken should also be only concerned with the objects closest to interest of the antecedent and consequent. To some there is an immediate aversion to this approach by their understanding that everything is ultimately interconnected. In other words, every action has a result and therefore many different results are possible even by the smallest change. But I follow the understanding of Pattee who states,

⁸ This approach is also similar with Popper’s proposal of “Piecemeal Engineering” as opposed to “Utopian Engineering.” Speaking of the piecemeal engineer, he states, “...he will make his way, step by step carefully comparing the results expected with the results achieved, and always on the lookout for the unavoidable unwanted consequences of any reform; and he will avoid undertaking reforms of complexity and scope which make it impossible for him to disentangle cause and effects, and to know what he is really doing” (Popper, Poverty of Historicism, 67).

“Casual interconnectedness is a matter of degree...Everything is connected but some things are more connected than others. The world is a large matrix of interactions, in which, most of the entries are very close to zero” (Tetlock and Belkin 19). No doubt there is a challenge of deciding which connections are stronger than others but it would be a mistake to say that we have to construct a totally different counterfactual every time we change a minute detail.

The second logical constraint has to do with the consistency of connecting principles or, cotenability. Tetlock and Belkin propose three minimal criteria for which need be satisfied, “...(first) should be specifically reasonably precisely, (second) be consistent with one another, (third) and be consistent with both the antecedent and consequent” (Tetlock and Belkin 21). The reality that counterfactuals tend to be extremely complex tends to weaken the principle of cotenability and therefore there is the possibility of connecting completely wrong antecedents and consequents. But we should not use this as an excuse for making false claims of connectedness. One example to consider is the statement of “...if Napoleon had possessed a stealth bomber he would have won the Battle of Waterloo” (Tetlock and Belkin 23). This is not logically consistent, because Napoleon and stealth bomber are not logically consistent. There is no possibility that Napoleon could have possessed a stealth bomber at the Battle of Waterloo. Therefore we cannot proceed with any intelligible information from this statement. So far, I have considered two constraints of the logicity of counterfactuals, the first one being, the taking of a surgical strike approach when methodologically

constructing counterfactuals and the second being consistency of antecedents and consequents, or contentability.

The next category of constraint is historical constraints. When composing counterfactuals we must follow the minimal-rewrite-of-history rule. Many scholars have proposed,

“...in possible worlds we should: (a) start with the real world as it was otherwise know before asserting the counterfactual; (b) not require us to unwind the past and rewrite long stretches of history; (c) not unduly disturb what we otherwise know about the original actors and their beliefs and goals” (Tetlock and Belkin 23).

In other words, we should try and stick as close to history as possible. Because if we try and rewrite an extended period of history we are faced with more chances for the logical constraints, earlier stated, to become strained and possibly broken. Also, there should not be an extended amount of time between two bodies of facts that we are connecting as antecedent and consequent. Because it would be false to assume that all other unconsidered objects would stay the same in the time gap. Therefore, based on the above we must follow the minimal-rewrite-of-(known)⁹ history rule and never allow extended time gaps of connection.

Theoretical constraints are the next category we should consider when producing counterfactuals. In other words,

⁹ Known is the sense that we stick to what is the consensus of people and their personalities and events and their facts throughout history.

“We need theoretical constraints on the connecting principles we use to link antecedents and consequents. Otherwise, we cannot rule out counterfactuals that start from reasonable antecedents but end in far-fetched consequences by proposing preposterous principles of causality such as...If North Korea had conquered South Korea in 1950, the economy of the South would have grown even more rapidly than it actually did because of the wisdom of the policy of self-sufficiency of the Great Leader Kim Il Sung” (Tetlock and Belkin 25).

If possible, we could follow the theoretical laws of social science, but as Popper has shown earlier, and which there is majority consensus, these do not exist. But this does not mean that we do not have structure in which we can ground our theoretical inquiry of counterfactuals. There are many well-established theories in social science such as “...theories that stress normative and institutional rules of fairness, cultural theories that stress group values and identifications, political theories of bureaucratic and interest-group competition, and cognitive theories of belief systems and bounded rationality” (Tetlock and Belkin 26). In order to produce plausible counterfactuals they must be consistent with these well-established theories.

Lastly, there must be psychological constraints to our counterfactual productions. This one might be one of the hardest ones to monitor and correct when we are constructing counterfactuals. Our psychological biases can greatly affect our projection of counterfactuals, and possibly even to a detrimental state. Therefore, we

should be extremely cautious and sensitive to the reality that we have do biases and they,

“...can creep into every stage of this inherently subjective process, from the initial selection of antecedents (for “mental manipulation”) to the evaluation of connecting principles to the willingness to entertain counterarguments and alternative scenarios. Bias appears inevitable, in part because of the cognitive limitations and motivational inclinations of the thinker in whose mind the thought experiment “runs,” and in part because of the extraordinary complexity and ambiguity of the task” (Tetlock and Belkin 21).

In light of this, one must be aware when making counterfactual projections of the possible psychological biases. In this section, I will briefly identify some of the cognitive and motivational biases which will help us to understand and identify them, so that we can do our best to avoid them at all cost.

To start, I will look at a widely proposed and accepted point, that is the principle of bounded rationality, meaning that we “...are limited-capacity information processors who rely on low-effort strategies to simplify an otherwise intolerably complex world” (Tetlock and Belkin 33). The same principle applies when we construct our counterfactual thought experiments and this could possibly distort our outcomes. Many will argue, this is the best that we can do when using human cognitive processes as

opposed to machines which produce counterfactuals.¹⁰ But “...the most lethal threat to the validity of counterfactual thought experiments comes, however, from theory-driven thinking” (Tetlock and Belkin 34). As stated earlier, well established social theories can assist us in making and evaluating counterfactuals but by taking on these social theories they also run the danger of losing our ability to see outside of them. This can be detrimental to our counterfactuals, as we are trying to provide an objective and unbiased product. Although this problem, I feel, can be solved through plural criticism and discussion about ones produced counterfactuals. Lastly, the counterfactuals constructor must be aware of outcome knowledge contamination. We have a tendency, in concern to cause and affect relationships, to let the known outcome effect the projected outcome. We must be on the guard against this, as the whole point of the counterfactual is to project an outcome yet unrealized. In summary of the cognitive biases, I started first with the realization of human’s simplification of cognitive processes which can be detrimental to counterfactual outcomes. Next, I looked at the biases of theory-driven thinking that can sometimes be hard to escape when constructing counterfactuals. Lastly, I showed, that when producing counterfactuals we must be on guard against outcome knowledge contamination which defeats the whole purpose of projecting unrealized outcomes. These are a few of the major cognitive processes in which we need to be aware in order to produce plausible counterfactuals.

¹⁰ This is a reference to counterfactual computer simulation. An overview of this process can be found in the book I have already been working out of *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics* in the chapter by Lars-Erik Cederman entitled *Rerunning History by Computer*.

Secondly, in my psychological constrains, I will focus on motivational biases that must be contained when producing counterfactuals. As hinted on earlier human are not computers and do carry with them motivations, dreams, and aspirations. Tetlock and Belkin lay out the four main motivational factors that tend to effect counterfactual production,

- 1.) "...Needs for predictability and controllability.
- 2.) Needs to avoid blame and to claim credit.
- 3.) Needs for consolation and inspiration.
- 4.) Needs for cognitive consistency..." (Tetlock and Belkin 35-36).
- 5.) Needs of power. (I would also add this as many counterfactuals have been maliciously constructed for the sole purpose of convincing people to act in a certain way so that the power of a certain individual or regime would be increased.)

These are the five factors that should be carefully monitored, and if found present they should be controlled or eliminated. With this I conclude my section on psychological constrains of the cognitive and motivational kind.

In conclusion of this section, I claim to have answered the skeptic's objection of, are not all counterfactuals subjective and equal in validity? What makes one counterfactual more plausible than another? I have answered this objection by giving a criterion in which to evaluate the plausibility of counterfactual projections. The criterion consists of four areas of constraint, logical, historical, theoretical, and

psychological. Logically, we must practice the surgical-strike method of construction and be consistent with connecting principles of antecedent and consequent. Historically, we must follow the minimal-rewrite-of-history rule, with which, we stick as close to history as possible, and also there should not be excessive gaps of time between connecting principles. Theoretically, we must be consistent with well-established social theories when constructing counterfactuals. And last psychologically, we must be aware of our cognitive and motivational biases when producing counterfactuals. With this criterion of constraint we are able to produce plausible counterfactuals. All counterfactual are not equally plausible and must be evaluated, criticized, and accepted upon objective criteria. In this section, I have clearly laid out a criterion with which counterfactuals can be evaluated. I close with a claim of the need for counterfactuals and a criterion on which to evaluated them,

“One the one hand, we acknowledge that thought experiments inevitably play key roles in the causal arguments of any historical discipline. On the other hand, we acknowledge that thought experiments are often suffused with error and bias. But, that said, we do not conclude that things are hopeless – that it is impossible to draw causal lessons from history. Rather, we conclude that disciplined use of counterfactuals – grounded in explicit standards for evidence and proof – can be enlightening in specific historical, theoretical, and policy setting” (Tetlock and Belkin 38).

Conclusion

The use of historical prediction has been looked down upon ever since Popper spent his energy writing against it. Popper felt that Historicism was more than just a philosophy or dogma, and he felt that this particular doctrine was being used by many leaders in the world to advance their own evil and selfish schemes and agendas. He was so adamant in writing against it that I have claimed he went too far, and his rejection of historical prediction lead us down an academic road of complete skepticism when it comes to historically based prediction. But as I have shown, historical prediction is useful and necessary in the human life. Therefore, it has been the project of this paper to give back some of the confidence in historical prediction that Popper stole through his skeptical analysis. I have done this through first, laying out Popper's position, particularly his position against Marx's historical materialism. Secondly, I have claimed that Popper went too far and produced tremendous skepticism towards any historical prediction, much like Descartes' Evil Genie and the problem of skepticism it posed. Next, I attempted to show that we do use historical prediction daily, and not only daily, but also on a larger scale of state policy making. Using both mundane daily examples and governing body's policy examples, I have shown the value of historical prediction and the great need for it. But, being consistent with Popper, when we do historical research and prediction we must guard ourselves from falling into the trap of Historicism by projecting possibilities in the future as opposed to predicting the future with unchecked certainty. Lastly, I proposed a criterion in which we can evaluate our historical research and prediction, specifically counterfactual prediction, which enables

us to make confident selections of more or less plausible counterfactual predictions. I believe this criterion has removed some of the skepticism that Popper created in his critical analysis of historical prediction. Also this criterion has given us a pragmatic way, with which, we can evaluate useful and helpful counterfactuals projections. My project is not claiming the complete ability to study the past and know the future, but it does give an objective criterion in order that we can be as reasonable and critical as possible when doing our historical research and projection so that we do not fall, like many before us, into the trap of Historicism.

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