**Other pasts, different presents, alternative futures** by Jeremy Black, Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2015, xiii+231pp., £45.74 (hardback) ISBN 978-0-25-301697-3;£18.65 (paperback) ISBN978-0-25-301704-8

Perhaps counterintuitively, I am going to begin this review of a book about counterfactuals by looking at the end, as it is in this conclusion that Black works his hardest to persuade the reader of the value of counterfactualism as a tool for the study of history. Here Black argues that counterfactualism can be used ‘as a valuable teaching method, used to indicate the complexities of past situations and choices; and as a more disciplined version of a widespread public need to appropriate and reflect on the past’ (p.202). It is in this vein that I have been asked to review this book: to look at its value in guiding our teaching of history and in particular the history of education. I must admit that it has taken me awhile to get to grips with this book in this regard: on the one hand because it left me pondering some of the examples from outside my own field, and on the other because accepting this review coincided with a new job developing a new undergraduate history degree. These things in combination have given me the opportunity to test and reflect on Black’s arguments alongside writing this review.

At the beginning of the book Black surveys existing uses and issues with counterfactual history. He discusses how it is often used in military history but makes claims for wider use of counterfactuals despite their often poor reputation as little more than historical speculation. Black also introduces a wide and erudite variety of potential case studies to support his points, demonstrating decidedly that it is not just military history to which this method has application . In particular, chapter six is an extended case study looking at Britain and France between 1688 and 1815 which provides an opportunity for Black to dig very deep into his arguments. In fact, I might go as far as to say that the sheer breadth and range of the case studies used sometimes obscures the points that Black is trying to make, and will take most historians far outside of their comfort zones.

Black tries to make his case for the use of counterfactual in history with three key arguments. Firstly, that using counterfactualism makes historians, and therefore by extension their students, aware that at any given moment in the past a range of knowledge and potential futures was available. As far as teaching history of education is concerned there is certainly value in making students aware of the ‘uncertainties and contingencies’ (p.199) upon which historical events have depended. Secondly, Black argues that counterfactualism makes the reader (in this case the student) aware of the author and therefore the historical interpretation inherent in historiography. In my own teaching, raising students awareness of competing historical interpretations has been vital, and often challenging and while I can see how counterfactuals might do this I am not sure that they are the only way to do it, or even the best way. Thirdly, Black invites us to add ‘what if?’ to the more common historical questions of ‘how’ and ‘why’ in order to see how choices are made from a range of possibilities available to historical actors, whether they are individuals, states, or armies. In this way, Black wants us to use counterfactuals to ‘dig deeper or to dig further under the often-too-readily-accepted explanatory surface’ (p.201) - something we constantly push our students to do.

What can those teaching history and in particular the history of education take from this book? On the one hand, I cannot disagree with Black about the value of thought experiments like counterfactualism in engaging students in key historical ideas such as agency. I agree also that the scepticism of some of the scholarly community when it comes to counterfactualism might obscure a more balanced assessment of its use as a pedagogical tool. I have certainly posed the ‘what if’ question to students and found it a way of engaging them in discussing important concepts of continuity and change. I can see how pausing to consider the uncertainties, possibilities and contingencies of developments in the history of education is useful to students, particularly when it comes to evaluating the ideological and practical basis of policy-making in education. Many a memoir or oral history about a person’s educational journey in twentieth century Britain ponders what would have happened had they not passed/not failed the 11+ exam, for example.

I am given pause, though, by the sense that counterfactuals encourage students to think of history as a set of causes, key features and consequences. My concern is that by focusing on ‘what if’ alongside ‘how’ and ‘why’ we leave aside longer term and more subtle elements of continuity, change and identity which mark so much of contemporary historical practice and debate. Black’s extended analysis does offer some examples here, but I am not sure I am wholly convinced of its applicability across the wide range of people embarking on undergraduate studies of history and education.

*Other pasts, different presents, alternative futures* will be of use to those teaching methods and sources to provoke reflection on individual teaching practice and as a tool for thinking more carefully about how we can appropriately use ‘what if’s’ in our teaching. For historians of education, Black’s ideas might be used in the classroom, with due care, to consider the alternative futures open to children in different educational settings. Students might then draw speculative dotted lines charting the ways in which these different educational presents ultimately shaped the future adults. While I cannot envisage counterfactualism taking on a large role in history teaching, awareness of when we already use it (implicitly or explicitly) and how it might contribute to shaping students’ learning can only benefit us as teachers.

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