
The Lead Economy Sequence in World Politics (From Sung China to the United States): Selected Counterfactuals

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ABSTRACT

How we make sense of world politics and episodes of accelerated globalization depends on our historical scripts. Validating one person's historical script versus someone else's is a highly problematic exercise. Counterfactuals, however, can be utilized to at least suggest or reinforce the asserted significance of different versions of political-economic history. A series of eight counterfactuals encompassing the past 1000 years are harnessed to buttress the utility of framing the development of the modern world economy around a chain of lead economies and system leaders extending back to Sung China and forward to the United States.

Counterfactual analysis is credited with various types of utility (Chamberlain 1986; Ferguson 1997a; Tetlock and Belkin 1996; Weber 1996; Parker and Tetlock 2006; Tetlock and Parker 2006; Levy 2008; Lebow 2010). For some, alternative history is entertaining. For others, it represents a challenge to conventional notions about causality. Some users believe that they can test theories with counterfactuals. Still others find their utility in probing future possibilities. I wish to employ a sequence of counterfactuals for another purpose altogether. Historical scripts in international politics that provide political-economic infrastructures for charting political and economic globalization vary considerably. It is not so much a matter of disagreeing about what happened in the past as it is one of disagreeing about which past events were most significant

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to an understanding of international relations processes. Ultimately, there may be no way to convert analysts from one historical script to another. Appreciation of what is most significant in history tends to be a highly subjective undertaking. Quite often, it seems to hinge on what sort of history we were taught in grade school. Declaring that one historical script is superior to another, then, can resemble attempting to communicate with hearing-impaired individuals. There are simply too many cognitive roadblocks to overcome.

It would be highly desirable if we could put historical scripts to empirical test just as we do rival theories. But we cannot. However, there may be at least one approach to indirect testing. If a historical script has a definite starting point and important possible turning points along the way, one way to assess the value of such a story is to impose counterfactuals on the important milestones in the chronology. If the counterfactuals stay within the rules of minimal revisions and they suggest that vastly different realities could have emerged with small twists, it does not confirm the significance of the historical script. But it should be regarded as at least reinforcing the script. If counterfactuals lead to alternative realities that do not differ all that much, one would have to be a bit suspicious that the chosen turning points were all that significant in the first place.

Accordingly, I develop or harness other people's alternative scenarios for eight significant points in a sequence of systemic leadership and lead economies that have driven globalization processes for almost a thousand years. Beginning in Sung China of the 11th – 12th century and traversing Genoa, Venice, Portugal, the Netherlands, Britain, and the United States, the claim is that each actor (or at least most of the actors) in succession played an unusually critical role in creating a structure of leadership that became increasingly global in scope across time. Along the way, a number of wars also performed roles as catalytic opportunities for the emergence of renewed leadership. Who won and lost these wars provides the basic fulcrum for developing counterfactual understandings of what was at stake. If things had worked out differently, markedly different structures of world politics and globalization possibilities would have been developed. In that sense, it can

be claimed that the significance of what did occur, the armature of the economic leadership historical script, has been reinforced, albeit indirectly.

COUNTERFACTUALS AND HISTORICAL SCRIPTS

Counterfactuals are said to possess a bad flavor in history circles.¹ They are often dismissed as without value or worse. But historians have their own problems and we need not dwell on their intra-disciplinary disputes. Social scientists have not quite fully embraced counterfactuals either. The two main reasons for this recalcitrance appear to be their implications for causality presumptions and their ultimate utility. Causally-speaking counterfactuals have some potential to be upsetting. We proceed on the basis of X 'causing' Y. When someone comes along and suggests that the Y outcome may have hinged on some minor flap of 'butterfly wings' or that, at best, X might have led to a half dozen different and equally plausible Y outcomes, the foundation of positivist social science is seemingly threatened.

An extreme case is Williamson Murray's (2000) very brief Churchill counterfactual. In 1931 a New York City cab driver collided with Winston Churchill on a street corner and injured him. Murray goes on to suggest that if Churchill had been killed in the accident that a strategically beleaguered Britain would have surrendered in 1940, turned over their fleet to the Germans who, in turn, would have conquered Europe by 1947 and gone on to fight the U.S. forces in South America. Just how these events would have come about are not explicated in the Murray scenario. But the overarching assumption is that one man stood in the way of a European victory by the Germans. Remove the one man and all is lost – or won, depending on one's perspective.²

There is a simple theory of the Great Man lurking in this tale. We do not usually base our social science theories on singular individuals. The 1945 outcome is most usually explained, most briefly, by the observation that the winning side had access to a great deal more material resources than the losing side. In retrospect, if not inevitable, the Allied victory was highly probable based on this asymmetry of power. To be told that much of that asymmetry made little difference and that it all hinged on a taxi

driver's error a decade or so earlier is downright irritating, if not disturbing. So, not only do counterfactuals complicate our ability to test theories by requiring potentially the construction of many possible rival hypotheses (what if Roosevelt, Stalin, or Eisenhower had died, Rommel been triumphant in the North African desert, or Hitler had been more successful as an artist?) that would be exceedingly difficult to test, they also undermine the possibility of reasonably parsimonious theory construction. World War II engaged many millions of people quite directly. The presence or absence of just how many different individuals might have made some difference? Since most of our theories exclude specific personalities, how are we to proceed? If counterfactuals such as Murray's were the rule, we could literally paralyze ourselves attempting to cope with their analytical implications. Not surprisingly, the easiest solution is to simply evade counterfactuals altogether.

There is, however, at least one way in which counterfactuals might play a useful role in the study of world politics. Analysts of world politics (and globalization) share no common understanding of the history of their subject matter. I do not mean to suggest that there is disagreement about whether a World War I occurred. Rather, there is an extensive disagreement about what time periods matter for developing a theoretical understanding of international relations. For the hardest-core realist, historical time periods are not all that critical. Any should do equally well because nothing much has changed. Liberals focus on integrating tendencies toward greater interdependence and thus are apt to start with the late 19th century globalization upsurge, even though earlier globalization upsurges are readily discernible. Others dispute the value of 1494, 1648, 1815, or 1945 starting points for 'modernity' in international relations.

A late 15th century starting point keys on the French drive into Italy as an act ushering in a period of increasing Western European systemness thanks, in part to the Spanish resistance and the long Habsburg-Valois feud that became a regional armature of conflict for the next century and a half. A mid-16th century starting point emphasizes a legalistic transition from empires to states as the central actor of international politics. The post-Napoleonic 1815 is

usually meant to capture the significance of emergent industrialization for altering the fundamental nature of international relations – or, if not its nature at least its form. The dropping of two atomic bombs on Japan in 1945 is a salient turning point for some who stress the distinctions between nuclear and pre-nuclear international politics.³

The adherence to multiple starting points need not matter much. Yet it seems to do so. Analysts who start at different points in time tend to adopt vastly different perspectives on what world politics is about. No doubt, there is more to these disagreements than simply different preferences for starting points. But the fact that analysts have much different historical scripts underlying their analyses seems less than coincidental.

THE LEAD ECONOMY SEQUENCE (SUNG CHINA TO THE UNITED STATES)

There are, to be sure, non-trivial reasons for initiating one's international relations historical script at one point or another. Nuclear weapons, industrial revolutions, and systemness are not to be treated lightly. But another way of looking at these more recent points is that they are simply that – more recent transition points – in a longer term process that changed fundamentally a millennium ago. Weapon innovations, industrial productivity, and systemness are also related to the earlier transition point. The argument is not that the earlier transition point is necessarily more significant than more recent ones. Rather, the point is that the nature of world politics underwent a fundamental change 1000 years that turned out to have rather major structural implications for world politics. None of the more recent transition points have eliminated the significance of the earlier point. They are, on the contrary, under-recognized by-products of the earlier fundamental transition in systemic processes.

What happened a thousand years ago to transform the basic nature of world politics? The Chinese, ruled by the Sung Dynasty, created the first 'modern' economy, characterized by monetarization and paper money, extensive commercial transactions on land, via canals/rivers, and on sea, maritime technology that involved multi-masted junks guided by advanced navigation skills unlike

anything known elsewhere, unprecedented iron production fueled by military demand, and the development of gunpowder weaponry. Without going into the details of economic innovation, the Sung appear to have been the first land-based state to transcend the limitations of agrarian economies via radical innovations in a host of economic activities ranging from agriculture through manufacturing to energy and transportation. In this respect, China, roughly a thousand years ago, deserves the appellation of the first modern economy.⁴

While this breakthrough has major implications for economic development, what does it matter for world politics? The answer is that it is the origin of a sequential process in which a lead economy emerges as the primary source for radical economic innovations that drive productivity, transportation, and commerce. Earlier states had managed to monopolize various types of innovation before but there was no continuity to the process. Innovations were both less radical in general and more isolated in time and space. What took place in Sung China initiated a process that can be traced through the next millennium and is still very much with us in even more developed and complex form.

Given its considerable economic lead in about the 11th–12th century, Sung China might have been expected to inaugurate movement toward an increasingly Sinocentric world system. It did not. In contrast to the image that we now possess of continuity in Chinese imperial predominance in East Asia, the Sung accomplished many of their breakthroughs in a competitive and threatening East Asian multipolar system. That East Asia contained multiple powerful actors a millennium ago may have contributed to the Sung economic breakthrough in transcending agrarian constraints. Military threat certainly encouraged iron production for armor and weapons and gunpowder applications. The inability to trade overland due to the hostility of neighbors may well have encouraged maritime developments. Yet this same threatening environment proved to be overwhelming. The Sung first lost North China with its ore and saltpeter deposits that were critical to iron and gunpowder production to the Manchurian Jurchens. South China was eventually overrun by Mongols in the 13th century.

The East Asian threat environment and outcomes in combat between the Chinese and their rivals set back the early Chinese lead in economic productivity and military innovation. It did not extinguish the innovations altogether but it did accelerate their diffusion in a western direction. Mongol armies co-opted gunpowder and Chinese engineers and spread the military innovations throughout Eurasia. The success of Mongol imperial domination created an opportunity for some Europeans (Venice and Genoa for the most part) to control the western ends of increased Eurasian east-west trade. Accompanying this increased trade were a number of ideas about technological innovation in maritime commerce and manufacturing that helped stimulate subsequent navigational and industrial revolutions in the Mediterranean and in Western Europe. The technical ability to escape the Mediterranean and sail around the world was further encouraged in various ways by the indirectly Mongol-induced Black Death, the demise of the Mongol empire, and increasing problems in engaging in trade on land in Eurasia in the absence of a singular imperial regime. Portugal was encouraged ultimately to stumble into the Indian Ocean as a means of breaking the Venetian-Mamluk maritime monopoly on Asian spices coming into European markets.⁵

Venetian, Genoese, and Portuguese innovations in developing maritime commercial networks and infrastructure (boats, bases, and governmental regulation) were impressive but were based on limited resource bases. The political implications of a sequence of lead economies took on a more overt appearance as the sequential lead moved on to the 17th century Dutch, the 18th – 19th century British, and the 20th century United States. Perhaps, the most overt consequences were in the outcomes of repeated attempts to take over the European region. The lead economies by no means stopped single-handedly the ambitions of the Spanish, the French, and the Germans through 1945. But they were certainly significant as coalition organizers/subsidizers/strategic leaders, concentrations of economic wealth, conduits for extra-European resources, and developers of tactical and weaponry innovations in the military sphere. Without the lead economies, markedly different outcomes in the warfare of the later 16th – early 17th, later 17th – early 18th,

later 18th – early 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries are not difficult to imagine. It does not seem an exaggeration to state that our most basic understanding of the ‘reality’ of world politics owes a great deal to the lead economy sequence that began to emerge in Sung China a millennium ago.

A corollary of this generalization is that the 1494, 1815, and 1945 transition points were dependent to varying degrees on the Sung breakthrough. The movement of the French into Italy in the 1490s reflected the general deterioration of the late-medieval Italian lead over the rest of Europe thanks in part to Italian city-state control of the western distribution of Eurasian east-west trade. That is, the French moved into a decaying Italian city-state subsystem and not when it was still thriving earlier in the 15th century. The British-led Industrial Revolution, culminating in a number of production breakthroughs in iron and textiles in the late 18th century and on was dependent on information developed earlier on the other end of the Eurasian continent. Such a statement does not imply that the European industrial revolution could not have occurred in the absence of earlier Chinese developments – only that it did not have to do so. The 1945 revolution in military technology embodied in nuclear weapons, of course, was also a resultant of the interaction of the earlier gunpowder revolution and the later industrial revolution.

A case can therefore be made for strong linkages among contemporary (read ‘modern’) world politics, economic development, and military weaponry that can be traced back to Sung China in the 11th and 12th centuries. Where do counterfactuals fit into this bigger picture? Basically, they reinforce the importance of this interpretation of the history of world political economy while, at the same time, emphasizing the fragility of historical contingencies. But even the fragility underscores the significance of a historical understanding of the continuing evolution of world politics. Contemplating what might have been gives us all the more reason to pay attention to what did transpire. A third value of counterfactuals is that they help to defeat the deterministic complaint so often levied against systemic interpretations. Things did not have to work out the way they did. A variety of other, alternative trajec-

ries are conceivable.⁶ Yet the plausibility of alternative realities does not detract from the fundamental fact that a historical trajectory or path was traveled that was critical to both the development of world political systemness and some of its most important structural features.

EIGHT COUNTERFACTUALS

Eight counterfactuals follow. Others are imaginable. Indeed, the potential number of alternative turns is rather numerous, if not infinite. But the eight that have been developed place maximum attention on the Sung to United States historical script and its possible twists at most of the major potential turning points. Note that each successive counterfactual is rendered less likely if preceding counterfactuals had actually materialized to alter the future.

Counterfactual no. 1

The Sung did not need to have lost North China to the Jurchen steppe warriors (see, for instance, Yates 2006). They had allied with the Jurchen initially to defeat a mutual enemy, the Kitan empire, later called Liao. In the process, the Jurchen realized how vulnerable Sung areas were to attack and, after Liao was defeated, turned to raiding their former allies. The initial goal was the customary hit-and-run extortion but Jurchen forces managed to capture the Sung capital and emperor after a string of disastrous battles. Sung forces retreated to South China abandoning North China to the Jurchen conquerors.⁷ If, however, the Sung had defeated the Jurchen and maintained control of the North – a possibility that was not inconceivable with better political and military managers, they would have been in a good or at least much better position to have defeated the Mongols in the next steppe-sedentary iteration a century or more later.⁸ A decisive defeat of the Mongols would have had a considerable impact on subsequent history. In East Asia, Sung economic and military progress could have continued unabated with less pressure from northern and western threats. Subordinated Mongols would mean that some two-thirds of Eurasia from Korea to Hungary would not have come under Mongol control. An accelerated diffusion of industrial and military technology throughout Eurasia would have been less probable. A Chinese set-back would

have been avoided and the opportunity for a European catch-up might have disappeared altogether. No Black Death might, paradoxically, have led to overpopulation problems in Europe.⁹ Western Europe might still have developed economically but surely at a much slower rate, especially if the introduction of gunpowder and cannons had come much later. The need for competitive states in Western Europe to pay for increasing levels of military expenditures would also have developed much more slowly. It is conceivable that the Protestant revolt against Catholic hegemony would have failed eventually, depending on whether the Netherlands gained its independence and England still joined the Protestant ranks. Without the American silver that the Spanish distributed throughout Europe in military expenditures, fewer resources would have been available in Northern Europe for economic development.

Farther east Muscovy would not have been favored by Mongol rulers. Kiev might have become the Russian center or an enlarged Polish-Lithuania and/or an expanded Sweden might have eventually absorbed eastern territory all the way to Siberia. Even the Ottoman Empire might have been able to expand to the northeast and continued to be an expansive empire past its late 17th century peak. It is hard to say what might have become of European forays down the coast of Africa or to the Americas. They might not have occurred at all or if they did, they might have come about at a slower pace and centuries later. In general, though, we would have much less reason to expect a European ascendancy to have taken place. Even if for some reason China had not become the most salient region in the world (as opposed to Western Europe), we should expect greater symmetry in the world's power distribution to have evolved after 1800 than in fact did emerge.¹⁰

Counterfactual no. 2

The Mongol attack on Eurasia was neither premeditated nor inevitable. Temujin or Genghis Khan acknowledged that he had little idea how vulnerable his opponents were at the outset. Only gradually did he realize that there was little to stop his attacks and that he could dream about conquering the 'world'.¹¹ Removing a single individual from history is a favorite ploy of alternative history.

Whether everything would have been different if one individual was removed from the scene 'prematurely' is often a dubious proposition. But in the case of the Mongols, a great deal did rest on Temujin.¹² Quite a few attempts to murder him very early on could easily have worked out differently.¹³ In his absence, it seems unlikely that the coalitions and military organizations that he created would have been very likely, particularly since they required an abrupt departure from standard operating practices that presumably was motivated by Temujin's inability to successfully manipulate or rely on traditional organizational forms.

Any developments that might have been associated with a Sung victory over the Jurchen and Mongols would also have been equally likely with an aborted Mongol takeover of Eurasia. In the absence of a Genghis Khan, the most likely nomad-sedentary pattern would have resembled the traditional trade and raid alternation that existed prior to the rise of Temujin to unprecedented power as the leader of Central Eurasian nomads. China would not have been occupied by the Mongols. Chinese decision-makers would have been far less likely to develop their Mongol phobia which led to greater official insularity from the outside world and a preoccupation with the northwestern frontier after the first third of the 15th century and into the 18th century. The Ming decision to withdraw from the outside world would have been less likely. But then so, too, would the probability of the existence of a Ming dynasty.

While it is likely that Chinese vulnerability to northern invasions would have continued, there still would have been a much greater probability that any Europeans venturing into Asian waters in the 16th century would have encountered a stronger Chinese naval presence than was actually the case. As it was, Chinese naval technology in the early 16th century was still adequate to the task of beating back the initial Portuguese intrusion into Chinese waters. An alternative future might have seen all European coercive maritime intrusions in the general Asian area repelled early on.

Chinese technology would have diffused more slowly to the West. It is certainly conceivable that eastern Eurasia would have improved its technological edge over western Eurasia. If so, any maritime European ventures to the East might well have been re-

stricted to the small enclaves they initially occupied in the 16th through 18th centuries. The European dominance of Asia in the 19th and 20th century would have been far less likely without an asymmetrical, European industrial edge. Alternatively, technological changes at both ends of Eurasia might have proceeded along parallel tracks and timing. The end result would of course have been a vastly different history everywhere in Eurasia encompassing the last half-millennia, if not longer.

Counterfactual no. 3

The European push into the Atlantic was stimulated by a variety of factors. It required larger ships with more masts and sail, rudders, and better navigational capabilities. To some extent these hinged on Chinese naval technology diffusing westward and major improvements in Mediterranean and southern European maritime technology. Information about Chinese naval technology would probably have diffused in any event but perhaps at a slower rate. Alternatively, there is the possibility that Chinese fleets might have circumnavigated Africa as opposed to proceeding no further than eastern Africa in the 14th century. If Chinese movement into the Mediterranean had had a parallel impact to the Portuguese movement into the Indian Ocean, a much different version of the gradual Western ascendancy in the East is quite likely.¹⁴ For the first three centuries or so of western expansion in Eurasia, the Portuguese, Dutch, and English were just able to hang onto precarious bases along the coast until technological developments involving steam engines and improved weapons gave them a decisive edge.

The motivation to seek profits in the east-west trade had a great deal to do with greed which we can assume is pretty much a constant in world history. The western European push in the late 15th century, nevertheless, was motivated in part by a desire to circumvent the Venetian-Mamluk monopoly which, in turn, was an outcome traceable to Genoese-Venetian conflict over how best to monopolize the Black Sea position on the overland Silk Routes. The Black Sea position was initially advantaged by the Pax Mongolica and then disadvantaged when the Mongols lost their control over a respectable proportion of Eurasia. The resulting higher costs on overland trade made the maritime routes connecting east and west via

the Persian Gulf and Red Sea in the west more attractive – hence, the Venetian-Mamluk lock became more probable after the Genoese position in the Black Sea (wrested earlier from the Venetians) became less attractive.¹⁵ Genoese investment in Portuguese and Spanish explorations into the near Atlantic was also a concomitant of Genoa losing in the Eastern Mediterranean (to the Venetians) and moving west looking for new profitable opportunities (*e.g.*, slaves and sugar production) in the Western Mediterranean and beyond.

Where does that leave the Portuguese circumnavigation of Africa? Portugal broke the Venetian-Mamluk lock on Asian spices coming into the Mediterranean for a few decades at least. The push into the Indian Ocean required considerable technological innovation in ship construction and navigation skills (Devezas and Modelski 2008) and took several generations to accomplish. It might have been forestalled by an earlier Castilian conquest of Portugal and the Spanish focus on eliminating Moorish control in the Iberian Peninsula (not accomplished until 1492). If the Portuguese had been more successful in seizing Moroccan territory – their first objective in 1415 – they might have been less likely to have kept moving down the African coastline looking for vulnerabilities to exploit. They would have been less likely to have found gold and spices in West Africa which allowed them to keep going farther south.

If the Portuguese had not entered the Indian Ocean in force in the early 16th century, it is quite likely that no other Europeans would have in that century – at least before 1595 and the Dutch effort to do so. But would the Dutch have chosen to go around the Cape of Good Hope if the Portuguese had not already done so? The Dutch effort was stimulated by a Spanish edict forcing them to look for alternatives to Mediterranean markets that were being denied them. Why not circumvent the Mediterranean markets and go to the source? But the ‘why not’ might have come a little slower if it had not already been accomplished by the Portuguese in the 1490s.

It is also possible to argue that southwestern Europeans were most likely to ‘discover’ the Americas in the late 15th century be-

cause they were situated closer to the Americas than anybody else. That may well be true but it is possible that the discoveries could have been delayed considerably if many of the encouraging factors in the late 15th century had been relatively absent or inoperable. Without American silver, European trade with Asia could not have proceeded as it did. The Europeans initially lacked sufficient coercive advantages and had few commodities, other than silver, that were desired in the east. If they could neither buy nor fight their way in, European participation in Asian markets would have been quite marginal at best. That suggests quite strongly that the European occupation and subordination of India, the Philippines, Indonesia, and, indirectly, China, once again, would probably not have taken place. The current world would be much less unequal in terms of income distribution between states.

Counterfactual no. 4

The 1588 Spanish attempt to land troops in England was not well executed but could have succeeded. The decision to conquer England stemmed from frustrations encountered in suppressing the Dutch Revolt. The logic was that if English support could be neutralized, the revolt would fail. The 1588 Armada was intended to provide cover for troopships that would ferry some 27,000 Spanish veterans across the Channel. The soldiers were not quite ready to embark when the Armada fleet arrived. English attacks managed to drive the Spanish fleet north thereby interrupting the invasion plan. If the English attacks had been less disruptive or if the soldiers had had another day or two, the invasion could have been initiated. Defending England on land were only a few thousand soldiers with any experience but not necessarily very reliable and some highly dubious militia units.

A Spanish conquest of England in 1588 could have been even more revolutionary than the Norman one in 1066. Spain was already predominant in Europe. Assuming the assumptions about the loss of English support would have doomed the Dutch Revolt, Spain and/or its allies would have controlled all of Western Europe within a few years. Protestantism would have been on the defensive in England and throughout northern Europe. A Thirty Years War would have been far less likely. North and South America

would have been under Spanish rule.¹⁶ The combination of the Portuguese and Spanish empires, following Philip II's acquisition of the Portuguese throne in the early 1580s would probably not have broken apart in 1640.

The Spanish might also have been able to suppress or delay the 17th century challenge for regional leadership and Spanish relative decline in the second half of the 17th century.¹⁷ Even if the Spanish had failed to stop the French ascent, the probability of English-Dutch opposition to Louis XIV's territorial expansion would have been substantially reduced. In sum, Spanish hegemony in Europe and elsewhere would have been considerably reinforced. When or if Spain's predominance had run its course, it would most likely have been simply replaced by France – meaning that Western Europe's fabled competitiveness could easily have disappeared, with major repercussions for consequent economic and military developments that drove Europe to the center of the world system by the 19th century. In this respect, the 'Rise of the West' might have been derailed altogether or at least postponed considerably.

Counterfactual no. 5

Goldstone (2006) has William of Orange successfully invading England in 1688 and capturing the English crown but then has him die in 1690 from a wound sustained in Irish fighting in 1690. The wounding actually occurred but in reality was less than fatal. William proceeded to eliminate resistance to his rule in England and Ireland. More importantly, the larger motivation for this conquest of England was realized. In 1688 France was preparing to attack Austria before resuming its intention of absorbing the Netherlands. England under the Catholic ruler James could be expected to again follow the French lead, as in the early 1670s, with a maritime attack on the Netherlands. As Dutch stadtholder, William's invasion of England with Dutch troops not only neutralized the English threat, it also brought England solidly into the coalition to thwart Louis XIV. By 1713, a financially exhausted Netherlands had become Britain's junior partner in managing the international relations of Western Europe and, increasingly, long-distance

commerce as Britain emerged into its first global system leader iteration.

Actually, Goldstone acknowledges that his scenario works whether the 1690 wound had been fatal or if William's invasion had failed due to an English naval interception at sea (thwarted by prevailing winds) or greater resistance on land than had occurred. Of the two possibilities, the latter seems more promising for counterfactual construction purposes.¹⁸ In any event, a French and English attack on the Netherlands in the late 1680s from land and sea could have been too much for the Dutch to withstand. Goldstone suggests that at best the Netherlands would have been subordinated to French regional predominance that would have included a French king on the Spanish throne (without a War of Spanish Succession) and French access to the Spanish empire. France might well have maintained its hold on Canada and, should there still have been a revolutionary war in the British colonies in North America, French intervention could easily have been on behalf of Britain rather than the American revolutionaries.

To the extent that the French Revolution was predicated on French state bankruptcy due to the escalating military costs of the 18th century, the Revolution might have been avoided if France had sustained fewer costs and more successes in places such as North America, the Caribbean and India. Presumably, antagonism with Germans and Austrians would have persisted but the ultimate outcome would have been a gradual shift eastward of the French boundaries due to French military successes along and beyond the Rhine. Latin America and the Caribbean would have remained within a French-Spanish colonial empire. India, at best, might have been partitioned with Britain. As late as 1900, Western Europe would have remained subject to French predominance with possible Austrian expansion into the Balkans without a strong German protector.

Goldstone adds in a strong technological component as well.¹⁹ Catholic hegemony in England does not stifle scientific research but the socio-political environment becomes less encouraging. Huguenots fleeing French persecution no longer view Britain as a welcome haven. The British navy's growth, no longer fueled by Anglo-French

antagonism, does not become a major catalyst for industrial experimentation and organization. A number of direct and indirect advances in iron manufacture, steam engine construction, and textile spinning machines are precluded as a consequence. The expansion of coal as a source of energy is restricted. The potential and implications of Newtonian science are never realized or fully developed. Europe would have been powerful in some parts of the world (the Americas) but not necessarily in Asia. Moreover, the combination of the lack of changes in political and economic structures implies that British democratization might not have progressed much either – with major ramifications for democratization elsewhere as well.²⁰

Counterfactual no. 6

The first counterfactual published as a book (Geoffroy-Chateau 1836) focused on Napoleon passing on a Russian attack and instead going on to conquer the world.²¹ Zamoyski (2004) envisions a successful second French attack into Russia after an earlier 1812 withdrawal from Moscow. Russia acknowledges defeat and surrenders its Baltic and Polish territory. Finland is returned to Sweden. Russian troops are dispatched to Spain to fight in the guerrilla warfare there. Prussia is demoted to a Brandenburg dukedom. Britain, losing in the Baltic and Eastern Mediterranean to combined French-Russian forces, accepts a negotiated peace. Most of Europe, outside of the Austrian empire, becomes first the Confederation of Europe and then the Empire of Europe, with Napoleon as emperor. Interstate rivalries within Europe are gradually extinguished and replaced by a regional bureaucratic framework focusing increasingly on regulatory functions.²² In part because Russian decision-makers proved incapable of returning their country to its 18th century form, industrialization sets in successfully and earlier than it might have in an alternative universe. Nevertheless, by the end of the 19th century, economic growth was proceeding most quickly outside of Europe and Russia with dominant economic centers emerging in North America, Brazil, southern Africa and some parts of Asia.

Counterfactual no. 7

Imagine what is called World War I being waged without Britain or the United States. We would not call it World War I but regard

it presumably as a wider-scale version of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870–1871 in which German predominance in Europe was introduced, if not established. A German-Austro-Hungarian war *versus* France and Russia presumably would have led to a similar collapse in the East and a less familiar defeat of France. It is even conceivable that the Central Powers could have won the day with Britain in but without the infusion of U.S. resources from 1917 on. Neither British nor U.S. involvement in World War I was ever inevitable. Britain might have remained aloof in 1914, as the Germans hoped.²³ The United States presumably entered late in the war to get a seat at the victors' negotiation table but would it still have intervened if it was clear that the Central Powers were winning?

One of the main implications of this scenario is that to the extent World War II was a continuation of unresolved issues in World War I, World War II might not have come about at all.²⁴ The process is similar to the story of a time traveler that accidentally eliminates one of her ancestors only to find that she has eliminated herself in the process. That clearly does not mean that the 20th century would have been pacific. It might still have managed to kill as many or perhaps even more people as a function of the industrialization of warfare but the format and maybe even the alignments might have been considerably different. If so, it might have been very difficult to reach the kind of world that sprang from the defeat of Germany and Japan in 1945. To be sure, the pace of relative decline (Britain's for instance) would have been slower and the pace of ascent (of the United States and Russia / Soviet Union) might have been much slower. The twentieth century (and after) could conceivably have remained multipolar and characterized by many smaller or more localized wars through its entirety. The total wars of the twentieth century required the full participation of the great powers in two major exercises in blood-letting. In the absence of the total wars, we might not recognize a world of weaker states, less advanced technology, and more complex, cross-cutting interactions among the more powerful states in this version of reality.²⁵

Counterfactual no. 8

The last counterfactual has a different outcome for World War II. One way in which this alternative outcome might have come about is if the German attack on the Soviet Union in 1941 had been successful relatively quickly, thereby allowing the Germans to turn on Britain and take it as well.²⁶ Downing (2001 [1979]) has an extensive scenario that focuses on an early German defeat of the Soviet Union but leaves the implications fairly open-ended with Britain and the United States continuing to prepare for an assault on German positions at some vulnerable point, perhaps in Egypt. Lucas (1995) also has the Germans capture Moscow before the 1941 winter set in which leads to an incorporation of the Soviet Union into the Third Reich. Burleigh (1997) argues that if the Lucas scenario had played out, the Germans might have installed puppet regimes in separatist parts of the Baltic, Byelorussia, the Caucasus, and the Ukraine. On the other hand, these were some of the same territories, the Germans sought as part of the Lebensraum program and could anticipate some degree of German colonization and SS genocide. Burleigh (*Ibid.*) also contends that we should expect the German war aims to have focused on other parts of the globe once their share of Eurasia was in hand. Africa, the Dutch colonial empire in Southeast Asia, and the United States would have become the next targets of an expanding German empire. In contrast, Montefiore (2004) has Stalin executed by his lieutenants (Molotov and Beria) but then Molotov leads a nationalistic resistance and counter-attack against the Germans in a way that the Georgian Stalin could not have. The subsequent scenario plays out in typical Cold War fashion except that Molotov survives to rule continuously after the war up to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. He is replaced by Gorbachev in 1986. Herwig (2006) has the Germans defeating the Soviet Union but a similar post-1945 future is salvaged by the U.S. deploying atomic weapons against the Germans. The subsequent Pax America is then due to U.S. actions alone – as opposed to a Soviet-Anglo/American war effort. Blumetti (2003) also has a German victory in 1942 that does not prevent a Soviet resurgence in 1944–1945.

Some scenarios have Germany occupying Britain before taking on the Soviet Union (Macksey 1980, 1995) but if Germany had managed to defeat the Soviet Union decisively and quickly, there might have been little to interfere with a renewed focus on Britain.²⁷ If both the Soviet Union and Britain had been taken out of the World War II equation, it is hard to imagine a 1945 scenario in which the United States emerged as the most prosperous and powerful leader of an anti-Axis coalition. At best, much of the world would be divided between Germany, the United States and Japan in an extremely uneasy cold war. At worse, the three might have continued fighting indefinitely until or unless one party came up with atomic weapons before the others. But keep in mind the American lead in the nuclear race presumes that the German effort was hard-pressed while Germany was under a multiple-front attack. A different outcome might have occurred if Germany had been less hard-pressed. Roberts (1997: 320) also notes that many of the scientists who later worked on the U.S. atomic bomb were in Britain in 1940 and most would have been captured if the Germans had occupied Britain early on.²⁸

A different approach to World War II is to have the Pacific theater work much differently along the lines of Japan not attacking the United States in 1941. John Lukacs (2003) counterfactual scenario is premised on the assumption that Japanese and U.S. decision-making circles were both divided on the wisdom of going to war in late 1941. We know that the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in December precipitating an unsurprising U.S. movement into a Pacific War, quickly globalized by a German declaration of war on the United States. But what if ongoing Japanese-U.S. negotiations had achieved some level agreement that caused the Japanese not to attack? In Lukacs' story, German successes in the Soviet Union and North Africa encourage the Japanese to attack Britain in Southeast Asia. A bombing of Hong Kong harbor leads to the sinking of two U.S. ships and a declaration of war on Japan by the United States in 1942. The rest of the scenario proceeds along lines similar to what actually transpired with the U.S. ultimately defeating the Japanese and gradually becoming more active in the European theater as well.²⁹ Black (2004), alternatively, simply gives the United States

more time to prepare for a concentrated effort to enter the European theater.

The scenario by Tsouras (2001; see as well Tsouras 2002) is more interesting. He has Japan, following up clashes in the 1920s and 1930s, attacking the Soviet Union in 1941 in coordination with the German Barbarossa attack.³⁰ By March 1942, the Soviet Union is forced to withdraw from this version of World War II with the Germans occupying Moscow and the Japanese in control of Vladivostok and its surrounding province. Tsouras halts his scenario at this point but it is clear that the nature of the geopolitical landscape has changed dramatically. Germany controls most of Europe and North Africa. Japan is occupying much of East Asia. An isolated United States and a Britain that might not have survived long in the circumstances are confronted with a tripolar structure in which the German and Japanese poles are vastly stronger than they were in reality. One can easily imagine the advent of a new type of cold war until or unless somebody was prepared to strike across the Atlantic and/or Pacific.³¹

CONCLUSION

We have now looked at a number of alternative scenarios relating to events occurring in the last one thousand years. The initial claim is that a sequence of lead economies beginning with Sung China created a critical structure for world politics that was intermittently punctuated by bouts of intensive warfare. These combat episodes were important in facilitating the rise of some key actors, the decline of others, and thwarting outcomes that would have led to vastly different worlds. Although little attention was paid to some of the intermediate parts of the sequence (specifically, the Genoa-Venice-Portugal string), the other parts of the sequence lived up to expectations. Each one, with some slight twists of chance, could have led to markedly different world political realities.

So what? After all, is that not what counterfactuals are almost guaranteed to deliver – some discernible change in reality that demonstrates how fragile reality really is? Yes and no. It is not clear that all possible turning points are equally linked to multiple alternative realities that matter. How much did it matter whether

the Genoese initially out-maneuvered the Venetians for control of the Black Sea in the 13th century (thereby establishing a better position to take advantage of the Mongol Pax) or the Venetians later surpassed the Genoese in control of Mediterranean trade (thereby establishing a better position to take advantage of the Red Sea route for Asian spices)? The answer is not that the two Italian city-state were entirely interchangeable but it is possible that outcomes would have been similar if they had reversed their order in the sequence. It is even possible to imagine another Italian city state, such as Pisa, taking their place. What was important was that some Italian city states took the initiative to organize European/Mediterranean markets for receiving and demanding Asian goods.

What if the French had not intervened in Italy in 1494? The Ottomans had flirted with the idea of landing troops in Italy a few years earlier. It is conceivable that the European reaction to such a move might have led to something similar to what did transpire in European international relations of the first half of the 16th century. Imagine if the Thirty Years War had been the Sixty Years War. How would international relations have changed?³² If atomic bombs had not been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, do we know that the Cold War would have been nastier than it was? Maybe yes, maybe no. But no Sung intensive economic growth spurt and possibly no European industrialization. No Mongol Pax and possibly continuing Chinese ascendancy as the world's lead economy and, again, less diffusion of Chinese technological gains to a wider world. A Spanish victory in 1588, a defeat for William III in 1688, a Napoleonic victory sometime in the early 19th century, a less-than-World War I, or a German victory in the 1940s and we should expect rather major consequences for the world politics of each respective era.

These potential turning points matter in part because they did not go down the counterfactual path but might have. They matter even more because of the path that was pursued at each point. They matter because they created a political-economic structure for world politics that has first emerged, then evolved and, so far, endured. The implications of what did happen (not what did not happen) are still with us today. As a consequence, they are a funda-

mental part of the history of world politics and accelerations of globalization that deserve greater recognition as a sequence of possible forks in the road that might have turned out differently but instead contributed mightily to constructing our past and present reality. If so, the lead economy sequence deserves much greater recognition than it has received to date. The various fragilities associated with the sequence also remind us that future contingencies are apt to be equally chancy. Humility in projecting our interpretations very far into the future is well advised. Moreover, little seems inevitable about the next iteration in the lead economy sequence.³³

NOTES

¹ Judging by the number of historians who have written counterfactuals, this complaint may be exaggerated.

² A similar effort by Large (2000) has Annie Oakley shooting a cigar held by an impetuous Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1889. If her aim had been less accurate and she had killed the Kaiser, the author suggests that Germany might not have pursued an aggressive *Weltpolitik* policy in World War I. This particular counterfactual is saved by the author's last line in which he notes that Oakley wrote the Kaiser after the war asking for a second try. Fieffer (2002) advances the thesis that if Lenin had been unable to get to Russia in 1917, the Bolsheviks would have failed to take over the Russian government and there would have been no Russian Civil War, no Stalin, and no Cold War.

³ No doubt, some might include 1989/91 for ushering in a post-Cold War era and for the genuinely American-centric analyst, September 11, 2001 might be seen as a critical turning point in perceived U.S. vulnerability at least.

⁴ See, among others, Hartwell (1966), Gernet (1982), McNeill (1982), Jones (1988), Modelski and Thompson (1996), Maddison (1998), and Hobson (2004) on the Sung economic revolution. De Vries and van der Woude (1997) make a good case for the 17th century Dutch deserving the first modern economy appellation. They certainly have a point in the sense in contrasting what the Dutch accomplished vis-à-vis the subsequent British industrial revolution. Menzies (2008: 214) briefly argues for 15th century northern Italy as the first European industrial 'nation', based on borrowed Chinese technology. Certainly, the case for an Italian-Netherlands-Britain European sequence of increasingly revolutionary industrialization deserves consideration.

⁵ On the post-Sung, Mediterranean transitional period see Modelski and Thompson (1996: 177–208). Different views, sometimes in agreement and sometimes not, may be found in Lane (1973), McNeill (1974), Scammell (1981), Lewis (1988), Abu-Lughod (1989), Tracy (1990), and Findlay and O'Rourke (2007). An-

gus Maddison's (2001: ch. 2) interpretation of this period increasingly resembles the leadership long cycle view expressed in Modelski and Thompson (1996).

⁶ I feel personally compelled to make this point because I have engaged in an academic debate with Ned Lebow over the implications of Archduke Ferdinand not dying in Sarajevo in 1914 (Lebow 2000–2001, 2003; Thompson 2003; and continued in Goertz and Levy 2007). Lebow argues that it is possible that World War I would never have occurred if Ferdinand had escaped assassination. I argue that World War I was probable due to certain systemic processes, including a number of 'ripe' rivalries, leader-challenger transitional dynamics, and increasing polarization. None of this means that World War I could not have taken a different form. For a completely different perspective, see the argument made by Schroeder (2004). But see also Taylor (1972 [1932]).

⁷ See Lorge (2005: 51–56) for an account of the initial Sung-Jurchen combat. Haeger (1975) frames the policy debate within Sung circles as one of non-accommodation *versus* appeasement with policy-makers preferring negotiation and concessions prevailing.

⁸ Despite an unimpressive response to Mongol attacks in the early 13th century, it still took two decades for the Mongols to defeat the Jurchen (Lorge 2005: 70) before moving on to the Sung in the mid-13th century who, in turn, were not finally defeated until 1276. Peterson (1975) argues that if the Sung had realized that the Mongols would prove to be an even greater threat than the Jurchen, they might have pursued much different and less passive policies that could have altered the outcome substantially, even without controlling North China. Most pertinent to counterfactual considerations, the appropriate response was debated at the time, with advocates of a harder line strategy losing to moderates who preferred not acting at all.

⁹ One interpretation of the Black Death is that eliminating roughly a third of the European population meant that the survivors had more income per capita to spend on long-distance trade goods than might otherwise have been the case.

¹⁰ Pomeranz (2006), for one, is skeptical that China would have duplicated the British industrial revolution.

¹¹ Jackson (2005: 46) suggests that the earliest evidence that Mongols believed that they were engaged in world domination dates only from the 1240s, a generation after the initiation of the Mongol expansion.

¹² Lorge (2005: 67) offers an antidote to an overly enthusiastic 'great man' interpretation of Temujin when he describes him as 'not a particularly brilliant general or accomplished warrior, nor was he physically very brave. His abilities in all three areas were respectable, he could not have become a steppe leader otherwise, but he most distinguished himself as a politician, both strategically and charismatically. Chinggis's armies overran most of Asia because he had managed to united separate and often warring steppe tribes and turn their preexisting military capabilities outward. His tactics were not innovative, and it seems the only substantive change he imposed upon the steppe armies was to spread a decimal organization system throughout his entire forces'.

¹³ Weatherford (2004: 3–77) retells a number of stories from the *Secret History of the Mongols* that indicate that Temujin was exceedingly lucky to have survived attempts to eliminate him beginning with being abandoned by his own family at a very early age, through his capture for slaying his half-brother, and escapes from various clashes with rival clans and tribes – all before his emergence as leader of the Mongols. Alternatively, Peterson (1975) discusses how the Sung might have reacted more proactively than they did to the initial appearance of the Mongols.

¹⁴ Menzies (2008) argues for what will seem to many others to sound very counterfactual. He claims that a Chinese fleet visited Italy in the 1430s and stimulated the Italian Renaissance. However, one could argue that the European push into the Atlantic predated the 1430s by several hundred years.

¹⁵ The story is complicated further by the Genoese practice of supplying new slaves for the Mamluk military organization from the Black Sea area becoming less viable as Mamluk military competition with Mongols waned.

¹⁶ Somerset's (2004) counterfactual has the American colonies revolting eventually from a Catholic England not controlled by Spain.

¹⁷ Parker (2000) thinks Spanish hegemony was doomed in any event thanks to Habsburg in-breeding and successively weaker rulers. See Martin and Parker (1999) for some equivocation about the likelihood of Spanish success had they landed in England.

¹⁸ Pestana (2006) notes that if William had died in 1690, Mary would still have assumed the English throne which might not have changed history all that much.

¹⁹ The Goldstone scenario is predicated on the assumption that only England and to a lesser extent the Netherlands were pulling free from a continental propensity toward monarchical absolutism and conformity. Eliminate the 'pulling fee' element and you unravel the probable development of western science and technology. At the same time, England was not all that much different from the rest of Europe so that slight alterations in political and military fortunes would have led to a less exceptional development trajectory.

²⁰ Another interesting Goldstone assumption is that industrialization and representative democracy are not general processes but, essentially, rare events based on 'a unique combination of factors that came together by chance in one location and generally not elsewhere' (Goldstone 2006: 193).

²¹ See Shapiro (1998). A now dated but annotated bibliography of alternative histories can be found in Hacker and Chamberlain (1986).

²² Trevelyan (1972 [1932]) also has Napoleon's imperial system surviving in much of Western Europe after Napoleon wins the Battle of Waterloo. Carr (2000), on the other hand, suggests that if Napoleon had won at Waterloo, interstate warfare would simply have continued throughout the 19th century. Horne (2000) thinks that even if Napoleon had won at Waterloo, it would not have ended the Napoleonic

Wars until Napoleon was defeated decisively – but this would not have taken too long to accomplish given the number of troops available to the continental opponents of the French.

²³ Ferguson (1997b) offers a detailed scenario for such an outcome and goes on to suggest that early German hegemony in Europe would have been better for Britain, possibly for Russia, and would have excluded the first U.S. intervention into European affairs. It might have simply led to an early version of the European Union.

²⁴ However, Blumetti (2003) offers a scenario in which the war ends in 1916 without U.S. participation but in which a second world war is still waged.

²⁵ Without the exhaustion of British resources in two world wars and the pressure of a new American system leader, decolonization, presumably, would at least have been delayed.

²⁶ In addition to having the British surrender early (Roberts 2002), another way is to have the Germans skip the Soviet attack altogether. Keegan (2000) pushes a scenario that has Germany move into the Middle East for the oil that it hoped to acquire in the Soviet Union. Fromkin (2000) echoes this gambit in a sketchy way. An inventory of alternative options is found in Alexander (2000).

²⁷ Roberts (1997: 300) notes that there was precious little left to defend Britain, aside from some surplus mustard gas left over from World War I, in May of 1940 when the invasion was first proposed to Hitler.

²⁸ A reader of an earlier version of this paper, Joachim Rennstich, notes that to the extent that post-1945 Soviet and U.S. nuclear and space capabilities benefited from scientists and information captured at the end of World War II, a German victory would have led to less or slower diffusion of technology in this sphere as well.

²⁹ Rose (2000) has the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor eliminating all three of the U.S. carriers that formed the core of the post-Pearl Harbor U.S. Navy in the real world, without really elaborating the consequences. Cook (2000) has the Japanese win at Midway but the U.S. still prevails eventually in the Pacific War. Some of the scenarios in Tsouras' (2001) edited work are similar but with different outcomes. Black (2004) uses a premise similar to Lukacs' which keeps the Japanese from attacking and gives the United States two more years to build up its military forces to fight in Europe.

³⁰ A Blumetti (2003) variation has Japan concentrating on the British Empire in a 'southern' strategy scenario and a postwar tripolar world in 1945 with Germany, Japan, and the United States as the leading powers.

³¹ For alternative scenarios to the Cold War that did actually emerge, see Almond (1997), Haslam (1997), and O'Connell (2003).

³² My hunch is not all that much but I start from the premise that the Thirty Years War's overall significance has always been exaggerated. It was important to central Europe but less so as one moves away from this not-always-so-critical sub-region.

³³ This observation implies that there will be a next iteration in the sequence and that, too, needs to remain open-ended.

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