

Mykola Bakaiev  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6836-7747>

## A METHODOLOGICAL INQUIRY ON COMPATIBILITY OF DROYSEN'S UNDERSTANDING AND WEBER'S COUNTERFACTUALS

*Gustav Droysen introduced understanding as the method of history. Max Weber analyzed what-if statements or counterfactuals as a form of causal explanation. Both scholars had a common interest in understanding and explanation. However, Droysen's explanation was defined as method of natural sciences and served no use in history, while Weber's understanding was focused on social reality rather than historical one. Still, precisely Weber's idea of difference-making counterfactuals was later reinterpreted as defining for historical counterfactuals. In this paper, I determine what their methodologies say about understanding and counterfactuals, whether their views are compatible and whether historical research can benefit from combination of understanding and counterfactuals. To do this, I reconstruct Gustav Droysen's views on understanding in the first part. Understanding here is a method that allows us to grasp events that are distant in time as contemporary ones through historical material and criticism. In the second part I review the tradition of counterfactuals of analytic philosophers (from Roderick Chisholm and Nelson Goodman to Julian Reiss) and Max Weber. Counterfactuals are conditional statements that contradict existing historical facts by changing or removing the causes of certain events, so that they can demonstrate the significance of these causes for historical events in case the counterfactual causes make a difference for the events. In the third part of the paper, I argue for compatibility between the methodologies, maintaining that understanding and counterfactuals can be beneficial for historical research in the following way: counterfactuals pinpoint the causes and main figures of historical events; knowledge about the figures improves our understanding of them; this understanding helps to see more counterfactual possibilities that can bring to light new causes, deepening our view of history.*

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There is a famous saying that “history knows no ‘if’” (Karl Hampe words as quoted in Demandt et al., 1993, p. 2). This is a traditional perspective that excludes what-if statements in history. By what-if statements or counterfactuals I mean here such events, a description of which contradicts the events of real history as they are counter to the facts of such a history. As such, what-if statements were tabooed in academic history, being based on nothing but speculations. It slowly changed after philosophers and historians started discussing the matter in a serious manner in the 20th century, but in the 19th century, when the methodology of contemporary history was forming, it was still the case.

This paper, however, examines how Johann Gustav Droysen's views understanding, belonging to the 19th century, are compatible with a more recent tradition of counterfactuals that started with Max Weber's methodological intuitions at the beginning of the 20th century. Both were pioneers in

their fields. Droysen was the first to introduce method of understanding into methodology of history, while Weber was among the founders of sociology, particularly developing its methodology.

They both share common interest in understanding and explanation. Droysen's notion of understanding has a complex structure, but preliminary I will cite John Zammito's definition of it within four dimensions:

- 1) “Pragmatic” construction of events that constitute “ethical world” of that moment.
- 2) “Material conditions” conditions, in which events are set;
- 3) “Psychological” dimension that accounts for identity and agency;
- 4) The most synthetic level, a conception of “ideas” that make “ethical world” actualize (Zammito, 2018, pp. 123–124).

As for Weber, his notion of understanding laid foundation for interpretive sociology. Weber's

understanding deals with the meanings behind actions within society. This type of understanding deals with social reality rather than historical. It also has no psychological dimension and “deals with reasonable expectations of behaviour” (Adair-Toteff, 2020, p. 83).

On the other hand, explanation doesn't involve psychological dimension at all. For Droysen, it is a method of physics, something different from understanding. In Weber's case, explanation is about causality, being a flip side of what-if statements or counterfactuals. Although this paper may mention to the issue of causality, I must say it is a complex issue that can't be discussed here. My focus here is historical understanding, historical counterfactuals, and their combination. Therefore, I turn to Droysen for understanding, as he is one of the founders of modern historical methodology and in Weber's case understanding doesn't involve history. And to Weber for historical counterfactuals, for precisely his definition of counterfactuals was later reimaged in philosophy of history.

The paper will be divided into three parts accordingly. In the first part, I will reconstruct the view on understanding of history according to Droysen. In the second, I will address the origins of counterfactuals as well as how they got methodological ground with the help of Weber's intuitions. And in the third and final part, I will reinterpret Droysen's understanding in view of Weber's counterfactuals, answering to the question whether something new can be understood from history by employing not only facts of history, but also counterfactuals.

### **Historical understanding in Droysen's methodology of history**

While history is an old field of research, the importance of understanding as the method of history was not clarified until the 19th century German historian Johann Gustav Droysen. Understanding is originally a hermeneutic notion that was not new to philosophy at the time, being already discussed by Friedrich Schleiermacher (see Schleiermacher, 1838). However, Droysen was the first to introduce hermeneutic understanding in history and differentiate it from both other scientific methods and textual hermeneutics.

Firstly, however, I should note that in respect to methodology, the 19th century can be seen as a reaction towards Comte's philosophy of science, known as positivism. In the first volume of his *Course of Positive Philosophy*, Comte postulated that all human knowledge has three stages in its develop-

ment: religion, metaphysics, and positive knowledge or science. All three differ in how they explain causal relationships in the world: 1) by intervention of the divine power; 2) by finding abstract entities behind these relationships; 3) by formulating such general statements or laws that cover some relationships as instances of the law (Comte, 2014, *Première leçon II*, pp. 3–5). According to Comte, only knowledge that employs the last kind of explanation, that is, positive or scientific, can be called ‘science’. In other words, any such knowledge should formulate general laws that cover particular empirical phenomena of the world like natural sciences do.

The German tradition of historicism (*Historismus*), most notably Leopold von Ranke and Johann Gustav Droysen, has argued that history is indeed a science (*Wissenschaft*), but at the same time it is not comparable to natural sciences and does not employ positive explanation as its method. Leopold von Ranke, a father of modern academic history, viewed history as a science about individuals rather than about general laws (see Stern, 1970, p. 54). Furthermore, Gustav Droysen insisted that historians understand rather than explain in his *Outline of Historik* (Droysen, 1868). Of course, Droysen wasn't reacting only to positivistic and similar tendencies in historical methodology (Maclean, 1982, pp. 484–485); it was also a reaction against Hegel's speculative philosophy of history (Gilbert, 1983, p. 328).

However, he did distinguish hermeneutic understanding from positivist explanation. Namely, the historian postulated that there are three scientific methods to inquire about the objects and nature of human thinking: 1) speculative, 2) mathematical-physical, and 3) historical. The essence of the methods is 1) to recognize (*erkennen*), 2) to explain (*erklären*), 3) to understand (*verstehen*). And these methods correspond to the old canon of sciences: 1) logic, 2) physics, and 3) ethics (Droysen, 1868, S. 11). And the last science of ethics is precisely what Droysen calls *Historik*, that is, a methodology of history: “ethics is the law of history” (Droysen, 1960, S. 270). For Droysen, ethics is the study of moral potencies rather than merely about relationship of individuals with themselves as others (Droysen, 1868, S. 37). Ethics corresponds to history, because in history understanding is not only about grasping the behavior of certain agents, but it ultimately is also about comprehension of “ethical world” and certain ideas that drives this world into actualization (Zammito, 2018, p. 123).

However, the historical method of understanding first and foremost aims to ascertain the inner life of others through their statements that we perceive, alike to hermeneutics. This understanding goes in a

hermeneutic circle, as “the individual is understood in the whole from which it emerges, and the whole from this individual, in which it is expressed” (Droysen, 1960, S. 25). For instance, we understand a particular statement of another person, based on the whole this person belongs to, that is, on our general ideas about their context (background, time, social status, and so on). Similarly, the context of this person is understood from their statement, in which they express both themselves and their context. Understanding is always continuous and never finished. The more we understand the person, the more we understand their context, and the more we understand their context, the more we understand the person. Finally, understanding is intuitive and has no need in any conscious reasoning. As Droysen puts it, understanding “is like an immediate intuition, like a creative act, like a spark of light between two electrophoric bodies, like an act of conception” (Droysen, 1960, S. 26).

Unlike mere hermeneutic understanding, however, historical understanding goes beyond the mere grasping of an individual mind. Aforementioned Ranke already believed that a set of individuals events in history elicits a sense of totality and God's will behind it (Zammito, 2018, pp. 119–120). Droysen, who transformed Schleiermacher's textual hermeneutics into hermeneutics of events, considered both individuals and totalities (such as epochs) to be suitable for historical understanding (Zammito, 2018, p. 123). And unlike everyday understanding, in historical understanding the difference in time and space complicates our understanding. We can try to understand these distant people and epochs, but due to this great difference we won't understand them as greatly as we understand our contemporaries and our epoch. History tries to eliminate this difference. It is the essence of history, according to Droysen, to understand people of the distant past as if they were speaking to us Here and Now. The task of history is to achieve this understanding by means of investigation (Droysen, 1960, S. 26). For such an investigation to be scientific, it must not contradict the historical empiricism. While empiricism in natural sciences is about the world of nature that is studied through explanation, the historical empiricism involves the human or moral world that is investigated through understanding (Droysen, 1960, S. 28).

To investigate this moral world, we need to interrogate historical material as precisely that makes historical understanding scientific. Historical material is a set of sources, remains and monuments that provide us evidence about people from distant past. Without it, our understanding is no better from

guesswork. Therefore, we understand people better by interrogating available primary and secondary sources that reflect their memories (memoirs, chronicles etc.), discovered remains of the things they used (old ruins, archeological artifacts, archaisms in language etc.), and preserved monuments that are both remains and sources (like a triumphal arch is not only a remain that is preserved till today, but also a source that reflects the memory of some events from the past) (Droysen, 1868, S. 14). Guessing is allowed in history as heuristics that expands on, rather than replaces the available material by the following means: 1) intuition, 2) combination, 3) analogy, and 4) hypothesis (Droysen, 1868, S. 15). Intuition allows historians to search and discover new material. Combination creates new material from correct arrangement of parts that do not appear to be the material on their own. Analogy is about comparing two similar events under similar conditions. Finally, hypothesis is a pure guess that is self-evident (like decryption of an old language can be built upon a guess that has no other proof except that it makes sense).

Given that detailed analysis of Droysen's understanding goes beyond this paper, I must stop here.<sup>1</sup> Although I may return to Droysen if needed, I believe to have said enough on the matter to adequately compare Droysen's understanding with counterfactuals and Weber, which is my next subject.

### Counterfactuals outside and within historical science: from analytic philosophers to Weber

Historical counterfactual is a description of such historical events that are contrary to the facts of actual history. While the word ‘counterfactual’ wasn't coined until the 20th century, historians are no strangers to what-if questions and counterfactuals. For instance, a classical historian Titus Livius already entertained himself and his readers with an enquiry whether Alexander the Great could be a match to the Rome had he lived longer (Livy, ix, 16–19). While history obtained its method during the 19th century, counterfactuals stayed to be a mere enjoyment with no place of its own in academic history.

It might seem strange given that historians were no extreme determinists, acknowledging the role of chance and free will in history. Contemporary historian Niall Ferguson, for example, notes that Droysen's philosophy of history was among those under-

<sup>1</sup> More on Droysen's understanding particularly and historical hermeneutics in general can be found in John H. Zammito's chapter *Hermeneutics and History* from *The Cambridge Companion to Hermeneutics* (Zammito, 2018).

lining the contingent nature of history (Ferguson, 1999, p. 48), which in fact is what makes the consideration of historical counterfactuals possible. “The life pulse of the historical movement is freedom”, states Droysen himself (Droysen, 1868, S. 35), but that doesn’t make him consider what-ifs. That is because Droysen and his contemporaries believed there was a place for divine providence in history: “historical greatness is only a mote in the sun-mist of Theophany” (Droysen, 1868, S. 38). To claim that some what-if scenario could really happen in our history would be to deny the providence in history, that is that God doesn’t necessarily know beforehand what should have happened in history.<sup>2</sup>

Another reason to exclude counterfactuals is probably their speculative nature. When counterfactuals state what could have been, they are formulated in what is linguistically known as speculative mood. Speculative mood signals that what the speaker judges from certain facts is only possibly true (Speculative Mood, 2003). Accordingly, when counterfactuals state what could have been contrary to certain facts, it is only possibly true as no one can know for sure whether events described in such statements could really have happened. So, following Droysen’s triad of sciences, counterfactuals belong to the science of logic that is governed by the speculative method of recognition (*Erkennen*) (Droysen, 1868, S. 11).

Indeed, the notion ‘counterfactual’ first appeared in logic and classic analytic philosophy of science (mainly, of natural sciences). In 1946, Roderick M. Chisholm brought up the logic behind *contrary-to-fact* conditionals, meaning ‘if-then’ statements about what might have happened (Chisholm, 1946). And in 1947, Nelson Goodman was the first philosopher to discuss interpretation of *counterfactual* conditionals in science (Goodman, 1947). Both philosophers have noticed that in science that discovers general laws, counterfactual knowledge is as important as factual is. When a general law states that something must happen upon certain conditions, it is actually irrelevant whether these conditions ever occur. Whether the conditions are factual or counterfactual, science must infer the effect of the conditions, given the general law. I can provide the following example: knowing Charles’s law that gases

tend to expand upon heating, I don’t need to heat the certain gas to know whether it would expand. I know that had I heated the gas, it would expand. Furthermore, Chisholm points out that some situations in physics will never become actual, like “Galileo... founded his dynamics upon the conception of a body moving without the influence of any external force” (Chisholm, 1946, p. 290).

More importantly, this is a development of a tradition that is opposite to Droysen’s historicism. Both Chisholm and Goodman refer to Carl Hempel, a philosopher of science and logical positivist who developed a deductive-nomological model of scientific (causal) explanation, which in turn relies on Comte’s notion of positive explanation. Deductive-nomological explanation is essentially a factual conditional, in which the effect (consequent) is inferred from the cause (antecedent) according to the general law (Hempel, 1965, p. 336). Likewise, what could happen is inferred from the same general law in a counterfactual conditional. Therefore, both factual and counterfactual conditionals are parts of explanation in natural sciences. This does not mean that counterfactuals are to be limited to natural sciences. Particularly, David Lewis, analytic metaphysician and logician, brings counterfactuals closer to history, analyzing them by means of possible worlds semantics (Lewis, 2001).

Possible world semantics is an approach that takes abstract possible worlds to analyze the logical modalities of necessity and possibility: what’s necessary happens in all possible worlds; what’s possible happens in some (cf. Girle, 2009; Menzel, 2021). Again, there seems to be no difference between actual and counterfactual situations. If it is necessary that certain conditions lead to certain effects, then this necessity will be true in all worlds: it is irrelevant whether the conditions are actual or counterfactual. Nevertheless, when David Lewis speaks about counterfactuals, he speaks about them in terms of how close they are to the actual world (Lewis, 2001, p. 14) and for that they all have to be accessible from this actual world (Lewis, 2001, pp. 4–5).

Logical accessibility is important in establishing truth-values of propositions from other worlds. Let’s say that in a possible world *m* it is possible that apples are red, it means that in some possible world *n* apples are indeed red. By moving from possible world *m* to possible world *n*, I am accessing the latter world with the help of a modal statement in the former world. In other words, I am generating a new possible world, having a modal statement of possibility in the previous possible world (cf. Girle, 2009, p. 28). The same thing goes for actual world and

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Droysen clarifies that freedom is not the opposite to necessity, but arbitrariness is. It means that there is necessity in history and events are not arbitrary. Meanwhile, the opposite of freedom is being dead of will and the highest freedom is living according to the highest good (Droysen, 1868, S. 35). More on Droysen’s views on necessity and contingency can be found in Friedrich Jaeger’s paper (Jaeger, 1997). And a more recent discussion on contingency and necessity in history can be found in Ben-Menahem’s paper (Ben-Menahem, 2009).

counterfactuals. Unless the other possible worlds, in which counterfactuals are true, are accessible from our world, that is, unless something was indeed possible in our world, it is impossible to judge whether a counterfactual is true. That means that only by stating that something could happen in the actual world, I can access the possible world, in which this something indeed happened.

This is similar to how counterfactuals are assessed in contemporary history. Niall Ferguson points out that historical counterfactuals “are not mere fantasy” but instead “they are simulations based on calculations about the relative probability of plausible outcomes in a chaotic world” (Ferguson, 1999, p. 85). And only those counterfactuals are plausible or probable “which we can show on the basis of contemporary evidence that contemporaries actually considered” (Ferguson, 1999, p. 86). In other words, such counterfactuals must be historically accessible, there must be a possibility that they could happen. Nevertheless, there is also a great difference between logic and history. Logic, which is a study of forms of reasoning, doesn't care about the content of possible worlds or counterfactuals since both are abstractions, whereas in history it actually matters. When historians understand an event (actual or counterfactual), it is not enough to know an abstraction of this event. Historians need to know evidence behind the event and only by understanding such evidence historians can understand the event.

Similarly, there is a difference between counterfactuals made by Analytic philosophers and historical ones. Analytic philosophers are not usually interested in history and its methodology, but rather in causation itself (Menziez & Beebee, 2020). They use counterfactuals as explanation why some event is truly a cause of some other event, and it probably doesn't matter whether they deal with natural phenomena or with events in human world.<sup>3</sup> Historians and philosophers of history also discern causes and effects, however they do so not to engage in abstract metaphysical talks, but to understand something about history. There are authors that are concerned precisely with historical counterfactuals (see Rosenfeld, 2016; Schuurman, 2017), but one paper by Julian Reiss deals with methodology of counterfactuals, building upon Max Weber's ideas (Reiss, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> This is a complex subject that goes beyond this paper. More on philosophical counterfactuals as such can be found in Starr's paper (Starr, 2021), and on counterfactuals and causation in paper by Menziez et al. (Menziez & Benbee, 2020). For a discussion on possible worlds see Menzel's paper and Girle's book (Menzel, 2021; Girle, 2009), and a paper by Berto and Jago for impossible worlds and counterfactuals (Berto & Jago, 2018).

What Reiss discovers in his writing is that Weber dealt with the same problem of causal explanation (*Kausalbetrachtung*) and counterfactual conditionals, just like classic analytic philosophers of the 1940s. Unlike said philosophers, Max Weber, a well-known methodologist of social sciences, analyzed counterfactuals in history rather than in natural sciences or metaphysics (Weber, 1906; Weber, 1949).<sup>4</sup>

Although Weber does not know the word ‘counterfactuals’, he still defines causation in history through what we call counterfactuals. He claims that causation (“the attribution of effects to causes”) takes places during a thought process, in which “we conceive of one or a few of the actual causal components as modified in a certain direction and then ask ourselves whether under the conditions which have been thus changed, the same effect... or some other effect “*would be expected*” (Weber, 1949, p. 171). Reiss interprets it in the following way:  $f$  is a cause of  $\varphi$ , if and only if a removal of  $f$  makes a difference to the occurrence of  $\varphi$ . That is,  $f$  causes  $\varphi$  iff “had  $f$  not been,  $\varphi$  would not have been” is true (Reiss, 2009, p. 712).

These difference-making counterfactuals are, according to Weber, imaginative constructs (*Phantasiebildern*), which are created in judgements of possibility (*Möglichkeitsurteile*), and the latter involve what can be called a counterfactual reasoning. Now, these judgements are essentially the same counterfactual conditionals or, as Weber puts it, “the propositions regarding what “would” happen in the event of the exclusion or modification of certain conditions” (Weber, 1949, p. 173). However, Weber is not clear on how exactly historians are supposed to modify a cause and to judge what difference it makes to an effect, only referring continuously to enigmatic “empirical rules”. Julian Reiss elaborates on this, creating a set of rules which he calls “historians' semantics” and divides it into two parts: one on the cause, another on the effect.

As for the cause, an altered one is created, first and foremost, in accordance with the minimal rewrite rule. It states that historians must rewrite as little as possible of what is known about a real cause while implementing a counterfactual cause (Reiss, 2009, p. 719). Second, a counterfactual cause must be historically consistent: conditions must be present in real history such that the counterfactual cause “was likely to obtain” (Reiss, 2009, p. 720). In other

<sup>4</sup> Please note that Julian Reiss uses the English translation of Max Weber (Weber, 1949) and does not refer to German original (Weber, 1906). Therefore, from now on, I will be referring only to the English translation, from which Reiss borrows main notions and builds his own theory. I will still provide German equivalents to Weber's notions if needed.

words, a counterfactual cause must be historically accessible.

What difference a changed cause makes for an effect is judged according to the historical context and generalization of human behavior. If there is such an event in history in which the absence of a similar cause leads to the absence of a similar effect, we can judge from the context that a similar absence would happen in this counterfactual case. Likewise, if it is known that a person tends to behave in a certain way under certain factual conditions, it is likely they would behave the same under counterfactual ones.

Of course, difference-making counterfactuals and corresponding historians' semantics are by no means perfect. For instance, Reiss is too focused on removing a cause, not noticing that it is merely an extreme case of modification. For example, there is no need in removing Hitler to see whether the WWII would have gone differently; it might be sufficient only to alter him, make him different to see whether it could prevent or alter the war.

Nevertheless, these and other problems of difference-making counterfactuals are not particularly relevant for this paper. On the other hand, a Weber-Reiss theory of counterfactuals, however imperfect it might be, will be useful for my final part of the paper, in which I assess whether Weber-Reiss counterfactuals are beneficially compatible with Droysen's conception of understanding.

### **Weber's counterfactuals and Droysen's understanding: a search for difference**

The name for this section is intentionally two-fold. I search for any difference between counterfactuals and understanding as well as I search for what difference, if any at all, counterfactuals make to understanding. The second part focuses more on compatibility of two notions, on what they have in common, rather than on their differences. Only after that I can assess whether it would be beneficial to combine the two.

However, to begin this exercise, I need to conclude clearly what understanding, counterfactuals and related notions mean, given what I have already discussed.

Understanding is a process of getting to know the inner life of others through their statements we perceive, which is never finished and goes in a hermeneutic circle: we perceive the statements better from the context and vice versa. *Historical* understanding is getting to know the inner life of others (individually or in totalities) in *history* through their

statements we perceive in *historical material*, which also goes in the circle.

As for counterfactuals, they can mean anything that is contrary to the fact. But so far, I've mainly used the term in the sense of a set of counterfactual conditionals. Counterfactual conditional is a proposition regarding what would have happened had certain conditions been excluded or modified. Counterfactual conditional is analogous to factual conditional, also known as scientific (positive) or causal explanation. Such explanation is the proposition regarding what happens following certain conditions (causes). The only difference between a counterfactual conditional and a factual one (explanation) is that the altered cause in the former didn't actually occur in our world.

In the case of history, a counterfactual conditional is also a way to figure out whether something really caused some other thing in history. For instance, is the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand really a cause of WWI? The answer is yes if a counterfactual with altered assassination or absence of such makes a difference to WWI. In other words, for the assassination to be a historical cause, it must be possible to construct a historically consistent altered assassination that leads to a different WWI.<sup>5</sup>

Is there any difference between counterfactuals and understanding? To begin with, both counterfactuals and explanation here deal with causation, but there is no causation in understanding. Moreover, there can't even be causation in understanding. The problem is that causation is diachronic (one thing comes after another), whereas understanding is synchronic.

Even when there is a great divide in time between historians and their subjects, this divide is ignored in understanding because the essence of history, according to Droysen, is to understand the subjects as if they were Here and Now.

Droysen says that explanation and understanding are sides of one prism, through which the human eye tries to sense the eternal light, something that is impossible to see directly, through different colors (Droysen, 1868, S. 11). In other words, understanding and explanation/counterfactuals are different sides of one truth, but they are different as colors of the visible spectrum. While Comte argued for methodological monism with only one scientific method, Droysen insisted on several methods, assigning each one strictly to one

<sup>5</sup> Further discussion on counterfactual situations that concern the Archduke's assassination in a wake of WWI can be seen in Maar's paper (Maar, 2016).

science: explanation is for natural sciences, while understanding is for history. The strict separation of methods between different sciences is no longer true, given that Max Weber already discussed historical explanation as mentioned above. And, in my opinion, explanation combined with understanding can lead to new perspectives in history just like a combination of different colors of the spectrum creates a new one.

For instance, it might be enough for historical explanation to establish with the help of a counterfactual that assassination of the Archduke is the cause of WWI, but it's not enough for history. Still, by constructing counterfactuals/explanations we are getting to know the chronology of the event, the main figures and possibilities that are present there. Knowing which figures were significant for the event, historians can now understand the mindset of these people. And after they understood it, they grasp the situation better and can employ even more historical explanations/counterfactuals that are related to the event. Doing so indefinitely can improve our knowledge of history.

To generalize the main point, interrelations between counterfactuals and understanding form a circle. Namely, counterfactuals help to determine the causes and main figures of historical events and thus explain them, establishing chronology. This knowledge of causes and figures of historical events improves our understanding of these people. For one, having established main figures, historians know better who to understand in order to grasp the event. Finally, insight into mindset of historical figures helps to see more counterfactual possibilities. Knowing which opportunities the figures took, what they said and what could have said, historians can deduce not only what motivated the figures to take the opportunity that established itself as event in our history, but also how they could react to alternative opportunities that were never realized in our history. Then the circle can repeat itself.<sup>6</sup> Having analyzed this alternative opportunity as counterfactual statement, historians can establish whether it produces, changes or prevents other events in history etc. Therefore, counterfactuals and explanation are quite different from understanding, and yet I argue that using them together is beneficial for our grasp of history.

<sup>6</sup> As I argue for the circle between understanding and counterfactuals, there is also a circle between individuals and epochs. In my argument I focus more on how counterfactuals help to understand individuals better. However, individuals can be understood based on their epochs as much as epochs based on individuals. Therefore, the same argument can be applied to epochs.

This is true for understanding and counterfactuals as defined above. However, the word 'counterfactual' does not always mean counterfactual conditional. Anything can be counterfactual as long as it is counter to the fact of our world. Therefore, I argue that counterfactual understanding is possible. When factual understanding is built upon factual material, the counterfactual one must be built upon counterfactual historical material, which is imagined by modification of material from our history. Let's say I am contemplating a counterfactual conditional in which Hitler decided to pursue a career of an artist rather than of a politician. I can't create it from a thin air as it won't be historical in that case. First of all, I need material from our history that precedes the change. I need it to know whether there are conditions that make the change accessible. I also need to suppose there is (could be) counterfactual material that makes the consequence of the change probable. For that, I also need material from our history to know the context and general behavior of Hitler as the Weber-Reiss theory of counterfactuals dictates. By doing this counterfactual exercise, I am rewriting history in the process. And while I don't actually need to create counterfactual material itself, e.g. by rewriting history I am not obliged to rewrite *Mein Kampf* as an artistic manifesto rather than a political one, at least I have to imagine this changed material and write a counterfactual history as if I relied on that material.

This is as far as counterfactual *conditional* goes, but it is already clear that I cannot build any counterfactual conditional without counterfactual understanding that helps me imagine the whole picture of another possible world. This way understanding actually becomes counterfactual reasoning, but it is not enough for history. For history, understanding is not a mere instrument to help reconstruct causality. On the contrary, it is an essence of history, whereas causality must be here to help us achieve a better understanding. As counterfactual history is still history, I have to move from causality to understanding. That is, counterfactual causality is accessed from imagined counterfactual material, and now I need to rely on this speculative material to understand the subject of my counterfactual. Apart from the speculative nature of this understanding (which should be mitigated, given the right methodology), this should not be that hard. Historians already understand people (or epochs) distant in time as if they were Here and Now. The only thing that counterfactuality adds is that now they are also from other possible worlds. If I compare counterfactual understanding with under-

standing of our history, it also demonstrates a difference, just not between cause and effect. It is not about what difference a cause makes for effect, but rather how different our history is from counterfactuals. In my example, how different is an author of a counterfactual *Mein Kampf* from the factual Adolf Hitler? While factual understanding helps us to grasp the context that surrounds the person I attempt to understand, a counterfactual one gets us better context for a counterfactual history. And, knowing the context of counterfactual history better, I can see even more counterfactual events which can improve my understanding even more. Finally, by repeating this over and over again, I can learn something about our history. For example, by differentiating this history from a counterfactual one, I can learn which events are unique for this history and therefore worthy of additional investigation, and which events are generic throughout histories and are not that relevant historically. Thus, the same circular argument holds even for a more general take on counterfactuals.

Finally, I must mention some limitations of the current research and its central argument. For instance, counterfactuals can indeed be beneficial for understanding, but the main danger of counterfactuals is that they are not from *our* history. Firstly, I made abundantly clear that they are speculative since one has to speculate what would have happened. This is not necessarily a bad thing as long as this speculation is historically probable, i.e. there could be historical material to support it. Still, even if the speculative nature is not a problem, historians constantly have to remember that they are historians of *our* history. There are many interesting possibilities, and it is very easy to get lost in them. If historians want to benefit from counterfactuals rather than get lost in them, they must always remember that it is done for the benefit of our history. Counterfactual conditionals must be always compared with factual conditionals of our history and counterfactual understanding with what we understand from our history.

As for historical understanding I have defined here, by no means I claim it to be perfect. For instance, it didn't account for biases of our society or values of the researcher. Historians understand others given what is presented in historical material, but this presentation is disproportional since sexist, racist or homophobic biases that have existed earlier made many partakers of history almost invisible in historical material.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, personal values of

contemporary historians can influence their understanding and there is no escape from it. No one can expect for an antiracist historian today to perfectly understand a racist person from the past. Therefore, it is important to be aware of biases and values that actively shape our history. Nevertheless, this goes beyond the purpose of my paper, which was to show that counterfactuals are compatible with historical understanding and beneficially so, which I believe I did.

## Conclusion

Gustav Droysen developed a notion of understanding in history, which is a way to comprehend individuals based on their epoch and the epoch based on individuals. He argued that understanding is as important for history as explanation is for natural sciences, contrasting the two.

Scientific explanation is also known as causal since it establishes that a certain cause leads to a certain effect. Max Weber has shown that causal explanation is present in history, and that it is based on analyzing imaginative constructs, also known as 'what-if' or counterfactual statements. That is, event *x* is a historical cause of event *y* if and only if a change of event *x* also changes event *y*.

Both Droysen and Weber used understanding and explanation in their work. However, Weber's understanding was focused on social reality rather than historical. Its offers no psychological depth and is merely a reasonable expectation of behavior, having explanatory worth. For Droysen, however, understanding may begin with grasping the behavior, but doesn't end with that with the end goal being comprehension of moral world and its ideas.

In similar way, Droysen's explanation served no use in history. He contrasted explanation and understanding, favoring the latter for historical research. On the other hand, Weber focused on causal explanation and counterfactuals. His idea of difference-making counterfactuals was reinterpreted as defining for history by Julian Reiss: historical counterfactuals are those that make a difference in history. In this paper I have demonstrated that their approaches towards understanding and counterfactuals are not only compatible, but their combination is also beneficial for historical research.

To repeat and conclude my main point, the interrelations of understanding and counterfactuals form the following circle: counterfactuals help to determine the causes and main figures of historical events and thus explain them; knowledge of the causes and

<sup>7</sup> For example, see Criado-Perez on how women are invisible in history and even now (Criado-Perez, 2019).



figures of historical events improves our understanding of their mindset; insight into mindset of historical figures helps to see more counterfactual possibilities, so that we can construct other counterfactuals, determine even more causes and figures of

our history. Repeating this process over and over can bring up new details of our history, albeit not without danger of getting lost in all the possibilities that could have happened with no sight of our own history.

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Бакаєв М. Ю.

## МЕТОДОЛОГІЧНИЙ НАРИС ЩОДО СУМІСНОСТІ РОЗУМІННЯ ДРОЙЗЕНА ТА КОНТРАФАКТИЧНОСТЕЙ ВЕБЕРА

Густав Дройзен запропонував розуміння як метод історії. Макс Вебер аналізував роль такого виду каузального пояснення, як твердження умовного способу або контрафактичності. Обидва дослідники мали спільний інтерес до розуміння та пояснення. Утім, пояснення за Дройзеном

визначалося як метод природознавства та не мало застосування в історії, а розуміння Вебера було зосереджено на соціальній реальності, а не історичній. Однак саме ідею контрфактичностей Вебера, що здійснюють зміну (*difference-making*), було витлумачено як визначальну для історичних контрфактичностей. У статті визначено специфіку розуміння та контрфактичностей у цих двох методологіях, розглянуто, наскільки їхні погляди сумісні та чи є суміщення розуміння та контрфактичностей корисним для історичного дослідження. Для досягнення цієї мети автор реконструює погляди Густава Дройзена щодо розуміння у першій частині статті. Розуміння тут є методом, що дає змогу сприймати віддалені у часі події як сучасні за посередництва історичного матеріалу та критики. У другій частині розглянуто традиції контрфактичностей аналітичних філософів (від Родеріка Чизголма та Нельсона Гудмана до Джуліана Ріса) та Макса Вебера. Контрфактичності є твердженнями умовного способу, що суперечать наявним історичним фактам, змінюють або прибирають причини певних подій, щоб у такий спосіб продемонструвати значущість цих причин для історичних подій мірою того, наскільки контрфактичні причини змінюють події. У третій частині автор доводить сумісність контрфактичностей і розуміння, демонструючи корисність сполучення методологій для історичного дослідження. Центральний аргумент щодо корисності цього сполучення полягає у такому: контрфактичності вказують на причини та головних діячів історичних подій; знання про діячів сприяє кращому розумінню їхніх особистостей; це розуміння допомагає відстежити ще більше контрфактичних можливостей, які можуть виявити нові причини, поглибивши наше бачення історії.

**Ключові слова:** Густав Дройзен, історія, контрфактичності, Макс Вебер, методологія, розуміння.

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