



Counterfactualism, utopia, and historical geography: Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Years of Rice and Salt*

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Abstract

Though counterfactual histories are treated with suspicion by some historians, they can be both useful and politically progressive. In fact it is possible to argue that counterfactual historical geographies might even be utopian. Though this seems counter-intuitive (how could alternative histories imagine a better future?), both histories and utopias encourage a kind of popular historicism, a sense that things have been (and could be) different. Whether this makes counterfactual fictions utopian depends on how you define utopia. Recent critical re-appraisals of the concept have suggested that we might think of it as a *process*, an ongoing critique of the present, not as an end in itself. Counterfactual histories can be utopian because they encourage a critique of teleology and determinism; their geographies can also be utopian because they remind us that spaces are multiple and open. A close reading of Kim Stanley Robinson's *Years of Rice and Salt* (2002), a novel that describes a world without Europe after a more virulent version of the fourteenth-century plague kills everyone west of Constantinople, demonstrates that counterfactual historical fictions present an unequalled opportunity to reflect upon the practice of history. The novel also suggests that counterfactual historical fictions also allow for a critical evaluation of the nature of space. The paper concludes by demonstrating the value of counterfactual fictions through their representations of history, and of spaces of movement, multiplicity, and agonistic encounter.

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Keywords: Counterfactuals; Alternative histories; Utopia; World without Europe; Kim Stanley Robinson

Introduction

This paper explores the relationship between counterfactual and utopian fictions through Kim Stanley Robinson's novel about 'a world without Europe', *The Years of Rice and Salt*. Establishing connections between the two forms lends counterfactuals some of the political energy of the utopia, meaning that they cannot easily be dismissed as an apolitical irrelevance. Counterfactual fictions can, in fact, be extraordinarily useful for the historical geographer.

The first section of this paper concerns itself with counterfactual and 'alternative history' and the ways in which they invite us to think through questions of temporality and spatiality. All historical work draws upon counterfactuals, because any account of the past picks and chooses from a range of possible causes and influences. It is worth noting that 'alternative history' is not the same as counterfactual analysis, largely because the latter is more interested in the limited use of a counterfactual to evaluate the significance of an isolated event in history, whereas alternative histories develop a longer and more complex series of outcomes from a counterfactual. However alternative and

counterfactual histories both encourage a reflection upon the writing of histories and geographies. While the paper is chiefly interested in alternative histories *written as fiction*, and the literary expression of the utopian impulse, many of the arguments in this first section apply to historical writing in general.¹

The second section of the paper considers a number of points that need to be addressed on the way to a detailed reading of Robinson's novel. Firstly, is it still worth looking for utopia in the twenty-first century? Secondly, utopia is usually located in the future; how can history be utopian? Finally, in what ways is this geographical? This is a more important question than it might seem as the ways in which geographers have approached utopian writing illustrate wider problems with the conceptualisation of space.

The final substantive section of the paper takes *The Years of Rice and Salt* as an opportunity to reflect upon the writing of counterfactual historical fictions and geographies. Beginning with a counterfactual experiment that highlights the Eurocentrism of much historical writing, Robinson provides a richly detailed alternative history. *Years* imagines a world in which the plagues of the fourteenth century kill almost everyone west of Constantinople, leaving

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¹ K.S.R. Robinson, *The Years of Rice and Salt*, New York, 2002.

the world dominated by a group of extra-European cultures, some national or imperial, others defined by religion or ideology. The novel takes the form of ten short books which cover seven hundred years of alternate history. Each book begins with a map, drawn by Jeffery L. Ward, and these are both unsettling and helpful because of their uncanny resemblance to and difference from the maps and timelines we are familiar with. Over seven centuries the countries of Dar al-Islam and China struggle for control of their Old and New Worlds: China and nations from Islamic Europe conquer the coasts of North and South America ('Yingzhou' and 'Inka'). Africa, Europe, the Middle East and Russia are largely Muslim by what would be the twentieth-century CE, while China holds most of what is left of Asia, plus Australasia. Progressive nations, led by India, defend Southern Africa and other smaller nations, while the Native American Hadenosaunee League is squeezed between the two great powers. A global 'Long War' between the superpowers lasts for nearly seventy years, dominating what would be the twentieth-century CE. While China wins, with help from the Travancore and the Hadenosaunee League, both of the major powers are exhausted and there are revolutions in Europe and in China. The novel ends with the prospect of more enlightened and peaceful times, though with the promise of further change.

While Robinson might be an unusual figure – an ex-student of Fredric Jameson's with a PhD in science fiction criticism, author of several utopian fictions, and a keen climber and hiker with interests in red-green strands of political ecology – he is an extremely popular and influential writer, and *Years of Rice and Salt* deserves attention as a best-selling alternative history that produces genuinely critical historical geographies.²

Counterfactual histories and radical historical geographies

Counterfactual histories face widespread suspicion, for their conservative adherence to the 'Great Man' or technologically determinist schools of history, and the possibility that contingency and chance compromise the recovery of hidden histories. The main problem, of course, is that these histories did not actually happen; why should they concern us?

In an insightful exploration of alternative and counterfactual histories, Barney Warf's answer to this question is to suggest that 'the answer lies in an exploration of how we understand historical change and the ways in which geographies are created'. Taking issue with the teleological and deterministic thinking of much history and social science, Warf suggests we need to 'shed light on the politics of contingency and to open a space for a new ontology of possibility'. Once we rid ourselves of teleological or determinist habits – Whiggish, Marxist, functionalist, whatever – we become more aware of how things might have been different. While conservative historians like Niall Ferguson use counterfactual history to criticise structural explanation in general and Marxist historiography in particular, counterfactual histories have also been popular on the Left. In fact Tetlock, Lebow and Parker note that Ferguson is something of a rarity, since conservative historians tend to argue that the present is the way things were meant to be, while those on the Left are more likely to see the rise of the West (for

example) as one amongst many possible outcomes. While we might not think of him as a counterfactualist, James Blaut is a good example of this because his critique of Eurocentric history followed his rejection of the 'inevitability' of the rise of Europe.³

This recognition can also have positive consequences in the present moment as it suggests that, contrary to what we might have been told, there is *always* an alternative and that the future is not set in stone. There is a parallel here with Jane Bennett's call to 're-enchant' our encounters with the world; she suggests that narratives of disenchantment, from Weber's iron cage to the common (mis)reading of Foucault's writings on discipline, can encourage fatalism rather than engagement. This insistence on possibility can encourage a kind of everyday utopianism; the appeal of counterfactual histories is their refusal to accept that the past, present or future must be singular. As Warf suggests, 'to abolish inevitability is to open up counterfactuals for analysis; by speculating on what might have been, we learn what was, and is'.⁴

Warf makes two further points about counterfactual histories. Firstly he notes that 'what separates good counterfactual analysis from bad is *plausibility*'. The former 'reads as if the events it describes really happened'; the latter is simply 'idle fantasy'. Avoiding the trap of assuming that plausibility is self evident, he notes that 'what we take to be plausible... is a value judgement, a statement about our culture's understanding of how the past – and the present – is constructed'. We make our choices somewhere between the two equally useless options of a single preordained outcome and a potentially infinite number of possible outcomes. Tetlock and Belkin's 'minimal rewrite' principle of counterfactual analysis, which suggests that as little should be changed as possible, is designed to ensure that the new version is as plausible as possible. This has become a central tenet of much counterfactual history, but what is not often noted is its similarity to other forms of fictional writing. Historical fiction, for example, usually presents a context that is consistent with what is known about the time and place in which the fiction is set, and readers are quick to note anachronisms and other inconsistencies. Similarly science fiction authors often strive for plausibility by making their stories consistent with agreed scientific principles. It is no coincidence that many of the most thoughtful and interesting alternative historical fictions have been written by science fiction authors. Ultimately plausibility is an *outcome*, a reading effect. It is quite possible for example that an economic historian of China – like Kenneth Pomeranz, a contributor to Tetlock, Lebow and Parker's collection – might find Robinson's novel *implausible*, while non-experts might be persuaded that it is quite likely that China could develop in the way Robinson describes. This might be the consequence of the author's rhetorical skills or the way the reader approaches counterfactual historical fictions; it cannot be assumed from the text alone.⁵

Secondly, counterfactuals tend to be rather unimaginative, concerning 'key' individuals (Napoleon or Hitler), military conflicts (the Second World War in particular), and significant inventions (gunpowder, the computer, printing). The fact that many counterfactual histories treat these events as self-contained and exogenous

² See S. Huston, Murray Bookchin on Mars! The production of nature in Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy, in: R. Kitchin and J. Kneale (Eds), *Lost in Space: Geographies of Science Fiction*, London and New York, 2002, 167–179.

³ B. Warf, The way it wasn't: alternative histories, contingent geographies, in: R. Kitchin and J. Kneale (Eds), *Lost in Space*, 2002, 17–38, 17, 18; P.E. Tetlock, R.N. Lebow and G. Parker, Preface: unmaking the Middle Kingdom, in: Tetlock, Lebow and Parker (Eds), *Unmaking the West: "What-if?" Scenarios that Rewrite World History*, Ann Arbor, 2006, 1–13, quote at 8–9. J.M. Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World*, New York, 1993; *Eight Eurocentric Historians*, New York, 2000.

⁴ J. Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings and Ethics*, Princeton and Oxford, 2001; Warf, *Way it wasn't* (note 3), 21.

⁵ Warf, *Way it wasn't* (note 3), 26 (original emphasis), 20, 27; P.E. Tetlock and A. Belkin, Counterfactual thought experiments in world politics: logical, methodological and psychological perspectives, in: P.E. Tetlock and A. Belkin (Eds), *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics*, Princeton, 1996, 1–38. For plausibility in Science Fiction see J. Kneale and R. Kitchin, *Lost in space*, in: Kitchin and Kneale (Eds), *Lost in Space*, 2002, 1–16.

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