

“History does not always prepare us for the future, stories do”. The multiplicity of alternative history presented during the 3rd International Meeting of ‘What if?...World History

Amanda Mazzoni Marcato^{1, 2, a}

¹| University of Juiz de Fora, Brazil

²| University of Porto, Portugal

^a| Correspondence contact: amandamazzonimarcato@gmail.com,

Abstract. The central objective of this article is to analyze the material presented by Cynthia Maria Montaudon and Alfredo Behrens at the 3rd *International Meeting of ‘What if?’ World History* by University of Porto, Portugal (2023). Based on Alternative History studies, oral presentations and discussions, session number 1 featured the following research: “Using Alternate History to teach business Consulting” and “Who killed Gina’s mother?”. The material presented will be analyzed, followed by their respective results so that, at a later stage, their contributions can be developed.

Keywords: Alternative History; Business; Alternate scenario.

1. Introduction

What if the company had made a different decision? What if Gina and her mother had lived two decades later? The “What if...?” questions are present at different moments in our lives, creating different possibilities for understanding our present based on the past and then designing a new future. As a genre of narrative representation, alternative history transcends traditional cultural categories [1], enabling new perspectives to face different contexts.

The approaches brought together at the 3rd *International Meeting of ‘What if?’ World History* by University of Porto, on November 22, 2023, session #1, are dedicated to the use of Alternative History in current contexts, from two different perspectives. The first presentation was made by Cynthia Maria Montaudon, from UPAEP University (Mexico), a specialist in different academic and business fields of expertise, with the research “Using Alternate History to teach Business Consulting”, followed by Alfredo Behrens - Ph.D. from the University of Cambridge – with the work “Who killed Gina's mother?”.

The main objective of this article is to present the two situations developed in the session, as well as their respective methods and results, highlighting the multiplicity of use of Alternative History in different contexts. Next, we will also highlight the importance of this approach in a future perspective.

2. Background

The two presentations under analysis, despite belonging to two different fields, converge as the result of a narrative based on alternative history. Within specific historical contexts, the question “What if” is responsible for a succession of hypothetical events, which, from different origins, are capable of constructing a present or past different from that which is accepted as true. This

construction is developed from the idea that, at a time in the past, some historical event did not occur in an alternative timeline in the same way as what we know to have occurred in our own timeline [2].

The creation of points of divergence [3] is, therefore, a central characteristic of the constructed narrative, responsible for creating different paths through which authors will organize their plots, characters/subjects, and their contexts of analysis. It is important to highlight that alternative history, despite creating different paths in the past, is also responsible for producing discourses that refer to the reality in which the questions were constructed [4], being part of the reality experienced in this historical moment, saying more about the present than the past, to then project a new future.

From studies relating to scenario thinking (or scenario planning) [5], we understand the creation of different alternative scenarios as possibilities for how certain stories can develop: a process and an attitude. Three principles are fundamental within this methodology: the long-term vision; the structuring of thinking from the outside to the inside and the possibility of multiple perspectives. Creating scenarios is, therefore, a different way of approaching and planning the future.

It is from these considerations that the authors based their analyses and articulated different possible solutions for their respective social problems, presenting the importance of these problems for constructing a change in the history of each narrated context, as we will see below.

3. Materials and Methods

The construction of the corpus of analysis for this article takes into account the data presented by the authors in their respective oral presentations and abstracts. We will also consider the discussions that took place after the presentations. The data was collected from session #1 of the 3rd *International Meeting of 'What if?' World History* by University of Porto, on November 22, 2023. The arguments and analysis methods of each author will be detailed below.

3.1. Using Alternate History to teach Business Consulting

"History does not always prepare us for the future, stories do". It is based on this idea that Cynthia Maria Montaudon, from UPAEP University, in Mexico, applies alternative history in the field of business, more specifically in the Consulting course (mandatory in Business schools).

According to Montaudon, her proposal to apply Alternative History/Storytelling in teaching began in 2021 as a way of proposing a new look at the field, a new angle, based on the need for greater focus on perspectives from the past, capable of changing the present and the future of companies.

Her work is based on two workshop experiences developed by the researcher and collaborators in 2022 and 2023 at UPAEP. Using common Consulting practices, students were invited to identify the obstacles that companies faced in achieving their results and, based on the new approach, create new scenarios and possibilities.

Montaudon describes the process she develops with students in the workshops in a few steps: 1) listening to the stories people tell; 2) understand these stories; 3) apply Alternative History techniques and, thus, 4) change these stories. The practice of storytelling in Consulting is also a point mentioned by the researcher, as it provides the delivery of new messages; ways to share a point-of-view; ways to create greater interest and recall and new representations of an idea, product, company or cause.

The first workshop, on November 22, 2022, which was the basis for Cynthia's presentation, lasted 3 hours and was called *First International Workshop of Hypothesis Management and Economics (HYP WORK M&E)*, at the Central Campus of UPAEP, with the presence of 23 students from 6 programs. The students were divided into small groups of 2-3 people, were introduced to Alternative History and understood its methodology through examples from films and literature. In this way, they were able to apply new concepts in their area of interest.

Stories are important because they mix themselves with the reality and cultural/social/economic experiences of those who hear them, from multiple perspectives. Listeners become active in the reported event and transform communication [6]. In this way, the workshops are developed to enable:

1) organizational change; 2) scenario planning; 3) business process reengineering and 4) benchmarking.

3.2. *Who killed Gina's mother?*

Alfredo Behrens, Ph.D. from the University of Cambridge, presented a research called "Who killed Gina's mother?", with the aim of exemplifying the need for a new approach that, in addition to structural factors, reveals what triggers the high number of homicide events in the USA.

Based on the data revealing that homicide rates in the USA are three times higher than those in Canada and that this rate rises and falls over time with a 90% correlation, Behrens presents the story of Gina Grant as a case study and alternative possibility for discussion.

Gina killed her alcoholic and abusive mother at the age of 14, out of a lethal impulse. After serving time in prison, she was admitted to Harvard, Columbia and Tufts Universities, which soon rescinded her admission due to her police record. Behrens' central argument is that homicide rates are influenced by solar activity. In this way, Gina's impulse would be related to the high solar activity at the time. The question created by the researcher is "What if Gina and her mother had lived two decades later?"

Behrens supports his arguments on the research "Solar-Driven Geomagnetic Disturbances Impact Homicide Rates in Europe and the USA", published in 2023, in collaboration with Beltrão and Almeida [7]. The authors proposed an experiment to study the possible role of geomagnetic disturbances in explaining the concomitant peaks and troughs in homicide rates in three major economies: Germany, the UK, and the USA. They have suggested that the patterns in homicide rates best respond to geomagnetic disturbances as measured by the Kp index lagged for 2 to 3 years [7]. The Kp-index is an indicator of disturbances in the Earth's magnetic field and is used to decide whether geomagnetic alerts and warnings need to be issued for users who are affected by these disturbances.

The practical dimension of Behrens' work corresponds to the possibility of alerting authorities responsible for public policies in cities to prepare for the homicide rate corresponding to the moment and solar activity.

The use of Alternate Scenario [8] used by Behrens creates a new way of dealing with uncertainty. From the question of "what if?" Different plausible scenarios are created, used to assist in the creation and development of strategies capable of providing warnings and/or supporting public debates about desired actions.

4. Results and Future Perspectives

The studies presented by the two lecturers point us to different results but which, based on a common axis, guide us towards similar future perspectives.

In the case presented by Cynthia Maria Montaudon, the use of Alternative History to teach Business Consulting highlights an immediate result for Business Schools: a new teaching approach that promotes multi-perspective learning and critical thinking, capable of attracting students, providing a new relationship of teaching-learning and new and effective practices in a future work context.

It is also important to mention the offering of workshops as a small/medium-term practical result. It is from these successful experiences, their analyses and reorganizations, that the proposed theory can be developed, and new studies carried out. The students' great interest in the workshops, in addition to resulting in more practices like this, also exemplifies a more enjoyable way of studying, applying this theory in Business Consulting.

In the case presented by Alfredo Behrens through the case of Gina Grant, the use of Alternative History enabled a new analysis of scenarios, creating effective forms of monitoring and review, which in addition to other structures are capable of providing new ways of proposing problem resolutions. Behrens' research also highlights an important contribution to the field: the ability of Alternative

History to go beyond academic limits and be present in different areas, such as public policy, criminology, economics, history, etc.

The concept of the question “what if?”, from its most fundamental form, should therefore become familiar to all areas of knowledge, not limited to just one type of reader, since the cognitive process of calculating alternative possibilities is increasingly necessary for different types of decision making, regardless of the area.

The proposal to apply the Alternative History methodology in future projects and studies is considered innovative and of great value here, as it allows us to go beyond the limits of what we are used to reflect on.

When thinking about future perspectives, we must also consider the event International Meeting of 'What if?' World History by University of Porto, in all its editions, as well as the discussions and publications related to the meeting, since it is from this sharing and dissemination that this new approach is consolidated, and it is gaining more space in research fields.

5. Conclusions

The multiplicity of Alternative History allows us to create new perspectives and hypotheses to work with different contexts and issues: “it does not change the past as we know it, but it changes our understanding of it, since the presence of the counterfactual in our discourse serves to increase the richness, subjectivity and the depth of human understanding of the world” [9].

It is important to highlight that both presentations are the result of different types of approaches. Montaudon used alternative history as a teaching-learning tool in the Business Consulting subject, considerably increasing students' interests in the topic. Behrens, on the other hand, used alternative history as a way to justify Gina Grant's behavior, through the correlation between geomagnetic disturbances and the explanation of the numbers referring to homicide rates. Unlike a causal relationship, where an event is the result of another, the observed correlation highlights the possible relationship between the variables of the hypothesis presented by Behrens.

As pointed out by the two approaches presented, alternative history is also capable of stimulating the ability to perceive different fields, reinforcing the idea that changes are made based on these possibilities and experiences. The multiplicity of uses of counterfactual history and counterfactuality contribute to our understanding of the paradoxes, uses, and possible problems of alternative outcomes to past events.

The creation of new scenarios, in both approaches, exemplifies the countless ways of approaching and planning future actions, based on previous experiences and knowledge. What at one point seems like a simple exercise can, when applied to specific contexts and practices, result in surprising data, helping to improve our planning and decision-making capacity.

6. Round-Table Insight

My experience as chair at the 3rd *International Meeting of 'What if?' World History* by University of Porto, on November 22, 2023, in session #1, was one of extreme learning. I would first highlight the possibility of exchanging experiences and debating with the lecturers, in addition to having had the privilege of following the development of their research. Secondly, I highlight the innovative nature of the event, which brings the new field of “Alternative History” as a new way to think about numerous areas of knowledge. As chair of this session, I was able to expand my contact with two different research studies that work with Alternative History, revealing the multidisciplinary aspect of the subject. The debate generated by the event, based on different purposes and areas of knowledge, is vital to disseminate the use and study of Alternative History within the academic field and, in addition, attest its transdisciplinary character.

Funding

My participation in this event was only possible through the exchange experience during my doctorate period at the University of Porto, which is financed by CAPES - Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior, Brazil.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Professor Ana da Silveira Moura, from the University of Porto, for the invitation to be chair of this session and for all the support before and after the event. I also thank the presenters Cynthia Maria Montaudon and Alfredo Behrens for sharing their knowledge and research and for participating in the session.

References

- [1] Rosenfeld, G 2011 *The World Hitler Never Made: alternate history and the memory of Nazism*. 2nd ed. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- [2] Lodi-Ribeiro, G 2003 *Ensaio de História Alternativa*. 3rd ed. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Scarium.
- [3] Hellekson, K 2001 *The Alternate History: refiguring historical time*. Ohio: The Kent State University Press.
- [4] Gallagher, C 2007 War, Counterfactual History, and Alternate-History Novels. *Field Day Review*, v. 3, p. 52-65.
- [5] Scearce, D, Fulton, K 2004 *What If? The Art of Scenario Thinking for Nonprofits*. GBN, California.
- [6] Tavares, A 2019 A alga, o Índio e a welwitschia: Storytelling como ferramenta de apoio ao ensino e à comunicação de ciência. *Rev. Eletrônica Mestr. Educ. Ambient.*, v. 36, n. 3, p. 292–318. <https://doi.org/10.14295/remea.v36i3.9701>
- [7] Behrens A, Beltrão KI, Almeida ALD 2023 Solar-Driven Geomagnetic Disturbances Impact Homicide Rates in Europe and the USA. *J Foren Psy*. V. 8, p. 284. <https://doi.org/10.35248/2475-319X.23.8.284> .
- [8] MacDonald, N 2004 Success is Extinction: Scenario planning in INGOs, *Development*, v. 47, n. 4, p. 115-120. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.development.1100080> .
- [9] Easterbrooke, N 2006 The Ambivalent Historicism of “Pattern Recognition”. *Science Fiction Studies*, v. 33, n. 3, p. 483-504. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4241466> .