

Other Pasts, Different Presents, Alternative Futures

Jeremy Black

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With a unique methodology, Black performs a what-if analysis of history to show how little it takes to change the world's fate.

Jeremy Black's recent historical analysis, *Other Pasts, Different Presents, Alternate Futures*, provides a fascinating glimpse into the past and attempts to discern what kind of a present it might be if a pivotal event had not occurred. Black, a history professor at the University of Exeter, constructs a lively narrative of history based on the analysis called counterfactualism. He defines it thusly: "counterfactualism—conjecturing on what did not happen in order to understand what did, or, more precisely, the use of conditional assertions based on what is known not to have occurred."

In using this method, Black cites a multitude of diverse events, ranging from the end of medieval history to the beginning of the nineteenth century and into the present. Black raises fascinating questions: What if Martin Luther had refrained from posting his criticisms in Wittenburg in 1517? What if Napoleon had won at Waterloo in 1815? and, What if Britain had not defended the Falkland Islands in 1982?

While most of the examples involve British history, there are intriguing instances of what American society might be like: What if the Confederacy had won the Civil War? What if the Supreme Court of the United States had not intervened in the 2000 presidential election? and, in a coy comment, What if Britain should have—not could have—been successful against the American revolution?

Black notes that this mode of thinking is not restricted to historical scrutiny. Contemporary culture utilizes the what-if question to predict the future. Politicians urge citizens to vote for a particular person so that a specific program can be enacted. Modern advertising strongly suggests that the use of a product will have beneficial results, be it health, wealth, or happiness. The admiration for Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" attests to the popularity of engaging in what-if thinking.

Counterfactualism among historians is not universally embraced, but Black counterintuitively concludes that this approach confirms that "there is no firm past from which to dictate to the future." This book provokes thought and speculation while also entertaining.

THOMAS H. BRENNAN (Fall 2015)

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