

Unmaking the West

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“WHAT-IF?” SCENARIOS THAT
REWRITE WORLD HISTORY

Philip E. Tetlock,
Richard Ned Lebow, &
Geoffrey Parker, *Editors*



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Acknowledgments

The idea for this book dates back to March 1997. Philip Tetlock had just arrived at The Ohio State University and gave an after-dinner talk at the Mershon Center about his long-running research project on counterfactual thought experiments. His presentation intrigued Geoffrey Parker, who had also written on “what if,” and they began to discuss how historians might address these questions in a more “scientific” or at least more open-minded way. Being rather undertheorized himself, Parker suggested convening a panel of better-informed historians to find out. Tetlock therefore approached Richard Ned Lebow, Director of the Mershon Center, who also had a serious scholarly interest in the proposed agenda, for financial support. At a meeting of the three of us to formulate a proposal in May 1997, the idea emerged of using the rise of the West as a test case—a particularly demanding test case, as readers will soon discover—of the power of counterfactual thought exercises to clarify the causal assumptions and expand the imaginative range of historical scholarship.

In November 1997, many of the authors represented in the book, together with Jeremy Black, Robert Cowley, Carole Fink, Richard Hamilton, Richard Herrmann, Edward Ingram, Ira Lapidus, Randolph Roth and Arthur Waldron, met at Mershon for a three-day workshop on “Alternative Histories of the Rise of the West.” In the light of those discussions, the three editors decided to commission chapters for a volume on “unmaking the West.” Some were procedural, but most were substantive, focusing on what workshop members had identified as the “turning points” at which the rise of the West could have been prevented, halted, or reversed.

The editors composed a series of ever-longer and more complex directives to the authors. Several faltered under the burden, but stronger shoulders and more cunning pens swiftly replaced them until, two years later, we had drafts of almost all the chapters. The editors then convened a second workshop at the Mershon Center at which Kenneth Andrien, Alan Beyerchen, Robert Cowley, Carter Findley, Richard Hamilton, Ira Lapidus, Charles Long, Patricia Seed, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam joined the authors for another three days of lively debate.

Our first debt, therefore, is to the colleagues who attended these workshops and provided valuable ideas, suggestions, and references and especially to the authors who accepted more editorial direction—from more editors—than any scholar should have to endure. We would also like to thank three other colleagues who provided insights and material that assisted us: Timothy Barnes, Richard W. Bulliet, and Sabina McCormick. Next we thank the staff of the Mershon Center, who handled arrangements for the conferences, especially Ann Powers and Beth Russell, who provided logistical support; Andrew Mitchell and Katherine Becker of the Ohio State University History Department for editorial assistance; Katie Mongeon and Carol Chapman of the University of California, Berkeley; our friend and colleague, Joel Mokyr, of Northwestern University, for his critical assistance in introducing us to Chris Collins and the University of Michigan Press; and the two anonymous reviewers for that press whose comments have helped us to sharpen our arguments and presentation. Finally, we acknowledge our indebtedness to institutions. The Social Science Research Council offered valuable seed money support at an early phase through its MacArthur Foundation supported Committee on International Security. And without Colonel Ralph Mershon, whose magnificent bequest to The Ohio State University created the Mershon Center, this project could never have been realized.

Preface

The Editors

Unmaking the Middle Kingdom

Imagine a book that began:

We Chinese take our primacy for granted. We are one of the oldest civilizations in the world and the oldest continuous culture in existence. Every day, our much sought after manufactures, specialty agricultural goods, and products of popular and high culture are exported to every corner of the globe. Our language and culture have spread far beyond the river valleys where they originated; currently, almost two billion non-Han people speak or understand standard Chinese. It is the universal language of science, transportation, and business. With the exception of a minor European country and its former New World colony along the banks of the Zian-te Lo-rent River, schoolchildren everywhere begin studying Chinese in their first year of school. Almost a third of all Han live overseas, intermingled with the peoples of the islands and archipelagoes south of us or in the new continents they colonized. New Guangzhou, whose twelve million people are spread out in the valleys and hills of what was once a desert bordering the far side of the great ocean, rivals Beijing in size and wealth. Its free and easy lifestyle, suitable to an automobile culture in a sun-drenched climate, seems to have an irresistible appeal to our own youth.

Did this have to be? Could China have failed to achieve the cultural and political unity that gave it a jump start on other regions of the world? Could anything have prevented our country from developing the technological, military, economic, political, and cultural dominance it currently enjoys? Could some other region—say India, the Ottoman Empire, or even Europe—have achieved this primacy instead? Many people will refuse to take such questions seriously. We Han are a practical people, not given to flights of fancy: our language does not even include “would have been” tenses. Some of our scholars have a further objection to claims that rest on “counterfactuals”—“what-if” statements about the past and the different outcomes to which they might have led in the present. The honorable historian En Hao Kar once compared counterfactual argument to mah-jongg: both are parlor games played by old women with time on their hands. Perhaps such a dismissive response is excessive. If counterfactual probing of the past can be done rigorously, we could evaluate the contingency of developments that led up to today’s world and thus understand more fully why events unfolded as they did.

To this end we convened a panel of prominent scholars with diverse expertise. Most are historians of Chinese imperial expansion under the Great Khans and their successors, but some study public health, science, religion, language, and literature, while others are experts on non-Han cultures. We asked our panel to identify the developments and turning points in China and abroad that they thought most responsible for the shape of the modern world and to consider plausible “minimal rewrite” counterfactuals: tiny changes that might have forestalled these developments or led to different outcomes at key turning points. They were further asked to consider “second-order counterfactuals”: subsequent developments that might have returned the initiative to the Central Nation.

There was a lively debate about key developments and turning points. Concerning China, a consensus developed that three turning points proved critical: first, if a typhoon had sunk the fleet that invaded and conquered Nippon, it would have deprived China of the base it needed for the naval exploration of the New World; second, the overthrow of the Great Khans by a native, inward-looking, “Ming” dynasty, after barely one hundred years of rule, would have ended overseas expansion; and, finally, the failure to adopt the phonetic alphabet introduced to China by European visitors would have prevented the development of a simple system of printing and the rapid spread of ideas. Our non-Han scholars came up with even more fanciful possibilities, the most extreme of which was to suppose that the Great Khan’s armies had returned eastward just

before they conquered Europe, leaving Christianity as the dominant religion of the region and creating conditions under which coastal kingdoms in Western Europe might conduct their own overseas explorations. Not even that alternative history, however, could unmake the primacy of the Middle Kingdom.

The preceding paragraphs reflect an alternative world in which China, not Western Europe, became the locus of worldwide colonial expansion and industrialization and achieved a corresponding degree of political, economic, military, and cultural hegemony. It is unlikely that any of the present editors—born in Canada, France, and Britain—would have participated in such a comparative counterfactual study except as token representatives of subordinate and backward regions. But many things are possible in counterfactual worlds, and it is not out of the question that one or more of our ancestors might have migrated to China instead of to the United States either seeking economic opportunity or fleeing oppression.

Entertainment aside, why have we opened our book with a *double* counterfactual—imaginary people in an imaginary world envisioning an alternative world that bears a mischievous resemblance to our own, the actual, world? The primary value of such an exercise, we suggest, is humility. The world we inhabit is but one of a vast array of possible worlds that might have been brought about if some deity could, as Stephen J. Gould once speculated, rerun the tape of history over and over. Psychologists have documented a widespread human tendency, known as “hindsight bias,” to see the future as more contingent than the past: that is, once we know what has happened, it is difficult to recall how unsure we used to be about the future. The authors of *The 9/11 Commission Report*, who had to deal with the phenomenon at first hand, expressed the problem with exemplary clarity.

In composing this narrative, we have tried to remember that we write with the benefit and the handicap of hindsight. Hindsight can sometimes see the past clearly—with 20/20 vision. But the path of what happened is so brightly lit that it places everything else more deeply into shadow. . . . As time passes, more documents become available, and the bare facts of what happened become still clearer. Yet the picture of *how* those things happened becomes harder to reimagine, as that past world, with its preoccupations and uncertainty, recedes and the remaining memories of it become colored by what happened and what was written about it later.¹

As the editors write this preface in October 2004, all political observers agree that the outcome of the U.S. presidential election only a few weeks ahead is “too close to call”; and yet, as *you* read these same words, the outcome (whatever it may be) will seem almost inevitable. How could your editors (like everyone else) have been so dumb that they failed to predict the correct result when the signs were so clear and the trend so obvious?

Experimental research has shown that the more people try to transport themselves by acts of imagination into counterfactual worlds, and the more richly they embellish those scenarios, the more likely they are to realize that history could indeed have taken a different course. “Unmaking the Middle Kingdom,” therefore, aims to shake our readers free of hindsight bias in order to become more receptive to the premise of our book: that it is worth allocating greater mental energy to the possibility that what happened in the past did not necessarily have to happen; that we must always grant contingency its due.

There is a remarkably broad and deep consensus across branches of human knowledge, as diverse as cosmology and evolutionary biology and economics and political science, that counterfactual thought experiments form an indispensable tool for drawing thoughtful lessons from the past, above all for giving us a nuanced sense of the degree of inevitability in what happened.² Moreover, the consensus extends to practitioners. Business schools and military academies include what-if scenarios as integral parts of their rigorous training for running corporations or winning wars. Governments set up special commissions in the wake of national catastrophes (such as the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001) in order to ascertain what went wrong and what reforms might have averted disaster.³ Financial analysts likewise devote close study to market meltdowns to assess what they could reasonably have foreseen and, by implication, what they should do to control future risk exposure. For all of these experts, the key question is not whether they are going to conduct counterfactual thought experiments but whether they are going to conduct such thought experiments well or poorly. Failing to acknowledge this fact is virtually a guarantee that one will conduct them poorly.

We leave it to others to explain why historians continue to mount organized scholarly resistance to counterfactual thought experiments and why only they still deny the need to undertake counterfactual reasoning in order to establish the probable causes of a given outcome. Instead, in this volume we apply counterfactual reasoning to an unusually challenging and ideologically charged set of historical puzzles: the debate over the

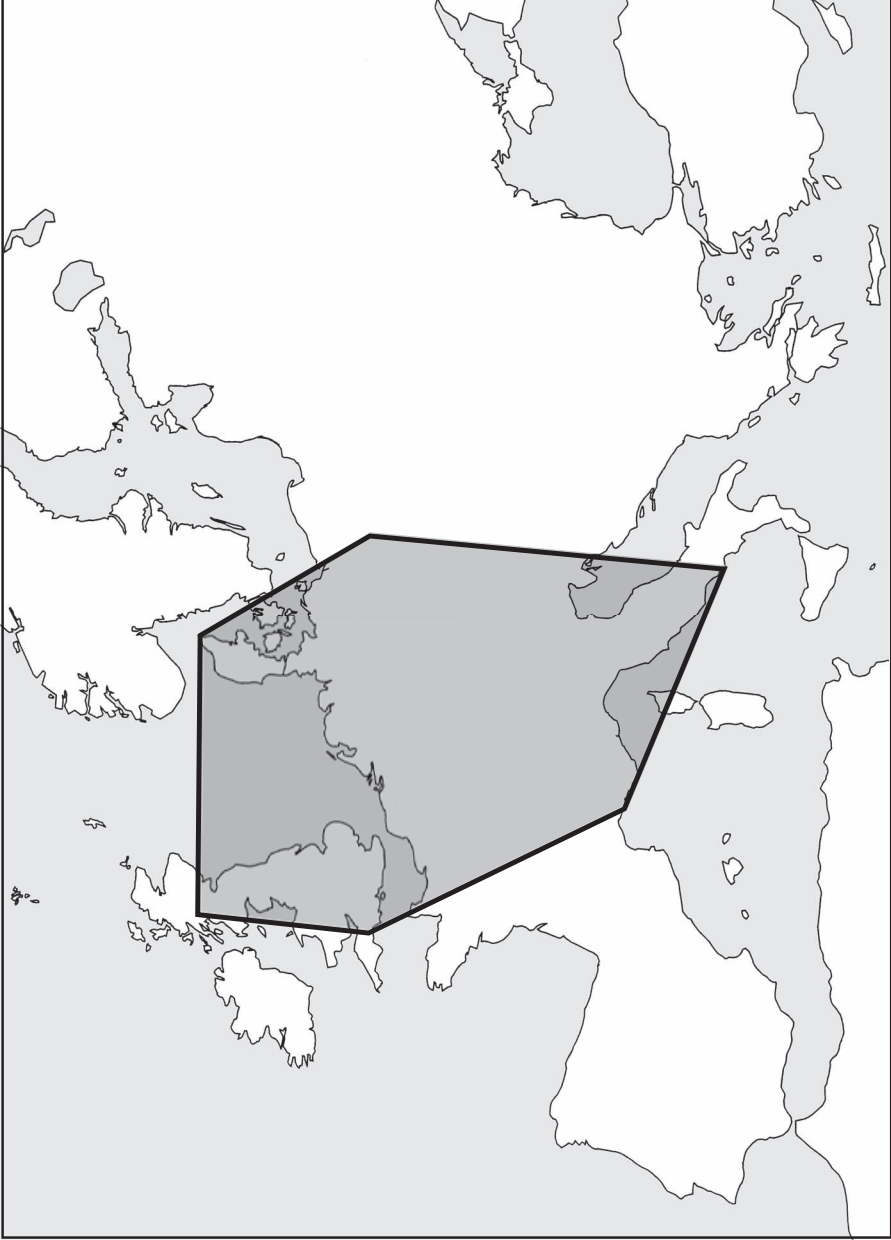
rise of the West that has engaged many leading intellectuals for over a century. But our approach is different—we believe radically different—from those of our scholarly predecessors. The editors represent an interdisciplinary team that is collectively as interested in the cognitive processes of observing and drawing causal lessons from history as in the historical record itself. We shall show that history looks different when our initial question is factual (why did x occur?) as opposed to “counterfactual” (why did alternatives to x fail to occur?). Framed factually, the central question in the “rise of the West” debate—one repeatedly asked in the past—is: “How did so few Europeans, working from seemingly unpromising beginnings in the first half of the last millennium, manage so quickly in the second half to surpass all other peoples on the planet in wealth and power?” Our central questions are very different. We ask:

- How close did we come to alternative worlds in which the West failed to rise, perhaps as the result of events internal to the West (such as an even more lethal black death or the failure to achieve an Industrial Revolution)?
- How close did external events (such as a successful Mongol invasion or stronger resistance to European expansion by Native American, African, or Asian states) come to preventing or derailing the rise of the West?
- Could the rise of the West have taken a different form—perhaps more benign, perhaps more malign?

Applying counterfactual history to this particular controversy poses three special analytical challenges. In the first place, controversy surrounds the question of how to define *the West*. Some, such as Victor Davis Hanson (chap. 2), define it as a set of moral and cultural ideas, a recipe for creating more civilized or advanced societies that, once followed, ensures the dominance of those societies. Others see the West as merely a geographical expression: in chapter 3, for example, Barry Strauss imagines an alternative Western civilization that rested on Persian and German rather than Greek and Roman foundations and yet eventually resembled actual Western civilization in most respects. Most of our authors, however, assume a West centered first on Greece and Rome, then on Latin Christendom, and only since the nineteenth century on Western Europe and North America. We agree. And, although we reject the exaggerated Eurocentrism of Charles Murray’s book *Human*

Accomplishment, for the purposes of this volume we equate the Western heartland between 1400 and 1940—the period covered by most of the chapters in this volume—with Murray’s “polygon”: a relatively compact area lying between Naples, Marseilles, Taunton, Glasgow, Jutland, and Wrocław (see map 1). Those whose accomplishments defined the West in this period (in the sciences as well as the arts) came overwhelmingly from Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and the Low Countries. The epicenter of this area may have changed over time—from Italy in the fifteenth century to the Low Countries in the sixteenth and seventeenth, France and Britain in the eighteenth, and France, Britain, and Germany thereafter—but only after 1940 did North American accomplishments become significant.⁴ Although at least a dozen definitions of *the West* have been offered by different scholars, we prefer a geographical entity with the polygon at its center.⁵

The second analytical challenge arises from the fact that what-if scenarios, whether or not they are related to the rise of the West, are widely identified with microhistories in which the crucial variable is killing or sparing a key player or a different outcome to a specific battle or power struggle. Most counterfactual histories therefore take the form of essays or novels. Extending counterfactual history to a macrohistorical controversy, such as the debate over the rise of the West, requires not only far more space but also a major conceptual stretch. It is not enough to show that a different victor would have emerged on a particular battlefield. Counterfactually weakening the West means not just delaying or preventing the emergence of (say) the British Empire; it means making sure that the change does not merely shift power to another part of Western Europe or North America. To unmake the West, one must rule out not just the specific form that Western hegemony took: one must eliminate *all* members of the large set of possible forms that Western hegemony could have taken. The complexity can quickly become staggering. The counterfactual historian confronts metastasizing networks of counterfactual inference about how “if x had happened, then probably y would have followed, and if y , then possibly . . .” The number of nodes of uncertainty thus has the potential to expand exponentially. But through this torturous process we discover historians’ most deeply thought-through answers to the “West versus the rest” debate: for eventually these “second-order counterfactuals” must either bring alternative histories back to something resembling our world, affirming the inevitability of Western dominance in some form, or else allow alternative histories to stray into



Map 1. The Heart of the West. Four-fifths of the leading artists and scientists who shaped Western culture between 1400 and 1940 grew up in the area within the shaded polygon. (Courtesy of Charles Murray, *Human Accomplishment: The Pursuit of Excellence in the Arts and Sciences, 800 B.C. to 1950* [London and New York: HarperCollins, 2003], 295–303 and 508–88.)

worlds that look and feel entirely different from our own, affirming the capriciousness of Western dominance.

A third challenge in applying counterfactual history to the rise of the West debate arises from the powerful ideological bias of many of the debaters. Surveys of professional historians have shown that observers who lean toward the political Right are more likely to maintain that things had to work roughly as they did and that Western dominance has been in the historical cards for a long time (sometimes as far back as a thousand years). Insofar as these observers tolerate explicit counterfactuals at all, they favor second-order counterfactuals—which bring history back on track in fairly short order—that concede that, yes, this or that surface cause could have taken on a different value and rerouted events briefly, but deeper forces would have returned history to something much like the trajectory we are now on.⁶ To these scholars, the West achieved geopolitical dominance because it exemplified distinctive cultural values and possessed unique political assets that conferred a long-term competitive advantage in creating and applying new technologies.⁷ The West won because it got certain things right—displaying more respect for property rights, implementing a clear separation of church and state, granting greater freedom to launch independent inquiry—that the rest got wrong. For them, any attempt to imagine counterfactual scenarios in which Western primacy is easily undone by minor twists of fate—a botched assassination here or a delayed invention there—will fail for the simple reason that the roots of the success of the West and of the failure of the rest lie deeply embedded in the mores, folkways, and institutional habits of the relevant societies.⁸

By contrast, observers on the political Left tend to deride such thinking as “triumphalist.” They find the rise first of Europe and then of North America to global dominance during the last five hundred years as just as improbable as it seemed to our imaginary Chinese panelists. For them, the rise of the West was an accident of history, and Western hegemony a fluke, a one in a million shot that can be readily undone—at least in our imaginations—by altering minor background conditions as late as the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries: if a key individual had died slightly earlier or later, or if the weather had been cloudier or windier, “we” would find ourselves in a very different world. These scholars also deny that there is anything superior about Western culture when it is compared with the spirituality and communal solidarity of many African and Asian societies.

Such an outlook makes it relatively easy to conjure up what-if scenarios that slow or even reverse the rise of the West or that facilitate the rise to dominance of other civilizations in China or India or the Islamic world.⁹ In this view, Western dominance was the by-product of natural forces that reflect no credit on Western civilization: geographical accidents such as the location of mountains and coastlines, geological accidents such as the ready availability of coal or gold or arable land, climatological accidents such as the timing of ice ages or the directions of ocean currents, and biological accidents (not always so accidental) that affect the susceptibility of various population groups to lethal diseases.¹⁰

Each side has been quick to mock the other: gloating “it had to be” counterfactuals from the triumphalist Right have crossed swords with bad loser “could have been a contender” counterfactuals from the multiculturalist Left. Counterfactual historians, in our view, earn their keep if they can check such partisan overconfidence by reminding us of just how many intricately interconnected assumptions scholars need to make to justify claims about the inevitable or improbable rise and fall of civilizations. We see enormous intellectual value—perhaps, indeed, the greatest service counterfactual historians can render—in unearthing the labyrinthine logical complexity of “what-if” assumptions underpinning the often all too confident claims about why the West, and not one of the rest, rose to global hegemony. We all need to be reminded that the greater the number of probabilistic “if-then” linkages in our arguments the more these sources of uncertainty add up and so the more vulnerable our conclusions become. And nowhere is it more useful to be reminded of this oft-neglected logical truism than in highly politicized controversies.¹¹

To more cynical readers who suspect this book of being yet another collection of what-if stories by frustrated historians (or, worse, social scientists) who wish they were novelists, we reply that not all counterfactual thought experiments are equally subjective and therefore equally speculative. We believe—and will explain why we believe—that such experiments must be conducted in a careful manner, must make rigorous use of evidence in support of their claims, and must not differ in fundamental ways from so-called factual history. To achieve these ends, all chapters incorporate three exacting quality-control questions designed expressly to neutralize the most common objections to counterfactual history.

- *How little needs to change for history to take an alternate road and thus justify an examination of events from a counterfactual vantage*

point? (The “minimal-rewrite rule”—which favors causes that require little tampering with the actual historical record—looms large in most chapters here.)¹²

- Assuming it is plausible to introduce some counterfactual alterations into the original flow of events, *how strong a case can be made as to the direction that subsequent events would have taken*, and, once engaged in projecting alternative futures for possible worlds, *how far “down the road” is it prudent to try to project what would have happened?*
- Reflecting back on the entire exercise, *how easy or difficult is it to identify ways in which the exercise either undermines or reinforces the particular interpretations of history one held at the outset?*

This volume includes ten essays that examine individual events that we believe critically affected the rise of the West: the possible destruction of Greek culture by Persia in the fifth century BC (by Victor Davis Hanson and Barry Strauss, who view the same counterfactual from diametrically opposing standpoints), a Roman decision not to crucify Christ (by Carlos M. N. Eire), a Catholic modern England (by Eire again, and then by Jack A. Goldstone and Carla Gardina Pestana, who explore an alternate set of pathways to the same counterfactual outcome and also reach diametrically opposing conclusions), the emergence of a more robust China (by Robin D. S. Yates and Kenneth Pomeranz), a failed transition to the Industrial Revolution (by Joel Mokyr), and a Nazi victory in World War II (by Holger H. Herwig).

The choice of these topics (rather than others) reflects not only their perceived prominence but also the editors’ ability to find scholars willing to write chapters about them: our sample of turning points is thus neither random nor representative. Nevertheless, each chapter addresses a common theme: the relative ease or difficulty of redirecting history at each juncture so as to slow, halt, or perhaps even reverse the powerful historical forces that allowed a remarkably small number of Europeans to exert great sway over most of the planet. Taken together, the essays to some extent reconcile the triumphalist Right and the multiculturalist Left because (crudely stated) they conclude that:

- Prior to about AD 1500, it is easy to throttle the baby in its cradle: there seem to be innumerable possibilities for redirecting history so that the West never “rises.”

- Beyond this date, it becomes progressively more difficult to find single junctures at which it is plausible to suppose that “but for this” events would have led the world down a markedly different path. By the eighteenth century, in order to derail Western expansion one needs to advance increasingly complex what-if scenarios that tinker with history at multiple junctures and stretch the credulity and patience of even indulgent readers.
- After 1800, it is virtually impossible to halt or reverse the rise of the West (although one can easily envisage it being either more benign or more malign.)

Although the volume covers a lot of ground, it does not attempt to examine global history over the past twenty-five hundred years—such an enterprise would have required many volumes—nor does it aspire to provide a definitive study of the rise of the West. Our goals are far more modest: on the one hand, we seek to provide new perspectives on an old problem, new insights into existing explanations, and new questions that lead to a more sophisticated research agenda; and, on the other hand, by doing so we want to demonstrate the utility—indeed, the necessity—of using properly constructed counterfactual tools to study history.

NOTES

1. *The 9/11 Commission Report. Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States* (New York: Norton, 2004), 339.

2. The technical definition of *counterfactual* is “any subjunctive conditional assertion in which the antecedent is known to be false.” See James Fearon, “Counterfactuals and Hypothesis Testing in Political Science,” *World Politics* 43 (1991): 169–95; and G. King, R. O. Keohane, and S. Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

3. *The 9/11 Commission Report* is full of what-if speculations: see, for example, pages 44–46 in chapter 1, 315–23 in chapter 9, and all of chapter 11, entitled “Foresight and Hindsight.”

4. Charles Murray, *Human Accomplishment: The Pursuit of Excellence in the Arts and Sciences, 800 B.C. to 1950* (London and New York: HarperCollins, 2003), especially chapters 11 and 13. Although we respect Murray’s energy in assembling data on the accomplishments of Western artists and scientists, we reject his argument that their achievements dwarfed those of other civilizations because he lacks comparable data: see, for example, his admission that he could not evaluate Chinese scientific and technological accomplishments. One problem is the “lack of translations for works in non-Roman alphabets,” he claims on

page 603, note 11—an inadmissible excuse in any case—but Murray fails even to use easily available Western-language works. Thus he dismisses “Joseph Needham’s seven-volume account of Chinese science and technology” as “microscopic” (259). Murray seems unaware that each “volume” is divided into parts (volume 5, for example, has thirteen parts, most of them larger than his own book) and seeks specifically to show the extent to which Chinese inventions preceded and often surpassed Western ones.

5. For the twelve versions, see Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 22–25. See also the illuminating discussion of how the West has been constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed in Jonathan Clark, “Is There Still a West? The Trajectory of a Category,” *Orbis* 48 (2004): 577–91; and *Our Shadowed Present: Modernism, Postmodernism, and History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), chap. 7.

6. Philip E. Tetlock and Richard Ned Lebow, “Poking Counterfactual Holes in Covering Laws: Cognitive Styles and Historical Reasoning,” *American Political Science Review* 95 (2001): 829–43.

7. See Gale Stokes, “The Fates of Human Societies: A Review of Recent Macrohistories,” *American Historical Review* 106 (2001): 355–71.

8. See the various degrees of triumphalism displayed in the following (arranged in chronological order): Douglass C. North and Robert Paul Thomas, *The Rise of the Western World: A New Economic History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society since A.D. 1000* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Eric L. Jones, *The European Miracle: Environments, Economics, and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Jean Baechler, John A. Hall, and Michael Mann, eds., *Europe and the Rise of Capitalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988); Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Millennium: A History of the Last Thousand Years* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1995); David Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* (New York: Norton, 1997); Alfred W. Crosby, *The Measure of Reality: Quantification and Western Society, 1250–1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); David Gress, *From Plato to NATO: The Idea of the West and Its Opponents* (New York: Free Press, 1998); Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2000); and Murray, *Human Accomplishments*.

9. Peter Gran, *Beyond Eurocentrism: A New View of Modern World History* (Syracuse, NY, 1996); David Herlihy, *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Bobby S. Sayyid, *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism* (London: Zed Books, 1997); Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: Norton, 1997).

10. This pattern of opinion is consistent with the hypothesis that those on the Left are more interested in counterfactuals that puncture “Western triumphalism.” But, in an ironic twist, the latest addition to the debunkers of counterfactual history, Richard Evans, has posited the opposite relationship between ideology and receptivity to what-if scenarios. Evans asserts that it is “young fogey,” “New Right” historians such as Niall Ferguson who are most eager to embrace

scenarios that undo the unmaking of their beloved British Empire (Richard J. Evans, “Telling It Like It Wasn’t,” *Historically Speaking*, March 2004, 11–15). The contradiction may be superficial since both generalizations are consistent with E. H. Carr’s “bad loser” hypothesis, as well as a sizable body of psychological research (Neal Roese, “Counterfactual Thinking,” *Psychological Bulletin* 121 (1997): 133–48). Both the Carr and Evans arguments do, however, border on the ad hominem. We should not forget that even the most bloody-minded radicals and reactionaries occasionally stumble on the truth—and that arguments must be addressed on their merits, no matter how tempting the name-calling shortcuts.

11. A large research literature attests to how insensitive people are to the compounding of sources of uncertainty in complex narratives and scenarios—a phenomenon sometimes labeled cascaded inference. See Philip E. Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

12. Philip Tetlock and Aaron Belkin, in their edited volume *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 21, coined the term *minimal-rewrite rule*, but the concept goes back to 1906 and Max Weber’s “Objective Possibility and Adequate Causation in Historical Explanation,” in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (Glencoe, NY: Free Press, 1949), 164–88. Tetlock and Belkin also lay out a taxonomy of logical, historical, and theoretical tests for thought experiments.