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Counterfactual Possibilities: Constructing Counter-to-fact Causal Claims

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Advertising fosters consumption. If advertising was not as pervasive in this society, then the level of consumption would be much less than its current level.

The preceding is a counterfactual argument.[1] It asserts that certain results would obtain if conditions were different than they presently are. In the field of academic debate, such counterfactual claims recently have been the subject of increasing attention. Both inside and outside of the debate round, students and teachers of debate have confronted issues related to the validity and the meaning of such claims. Scholarship on counterfactual analysis in academic debate to date has focused on issues such as the paradigmatic validity of counterfactuals (Roskoski, 1992; 1994), their relationship to topicality and competition (Korcok, 1994), their applications within recent CEDA topics (Broda-Bahm, 1994; Hoe, 1994; Roskoski, 1994), problems associated with their use (Berube & Pray, 1994; Voight & Stanfield, 1992), and the issue of infinite regression (Broda-Bahm, 1994).

Without a doubt, many technical issues await resolution. These concerns can be most clearly addressed, however, in the context of a clear understanding of the possible meanings of counterfactual analysis and application. Accordingly, after first justifying the the need for a schema for counterfactual analysis, the present essay will consider several such schemata, and ultimately advocate one as a consistent and relatively clear method of constructing counterfactual claims.[2] Such a focus on how we conceive of the counterfactual is not merely an exploration into a single "exotic" argument form. As the next section will show, the

[1]A counterfactual claim, also known as a "contrary-to-fact conditional" or a "subjunctive conditional," can be defined as an assertion about matters which are not, at present, believed to exist. Counterfactual claims are made whenever speculation centers on what *would* happen, *if* something were the case. As Richard Creath (1989) notes, "As a first approximation we might say that a counterfactual is any sentence which says what *would* happen under specified conditions, even though those conditions do not in fact obtain. . . . A typical, if somewhat shopworn, example of a counterfactual is: 'If I had struck that match, it would have lit'" (p. 95).

[2]It is important to note that in promoting a *schema* for constructing counterfactual claims, I am not articulating a *test* of their validity as causal statements. There are several well-known tools for evaluating causal statements (e.g., see Mill, 1900, pp. 255-66.). The present essay deals with the question of how to structure, articulate, or set-up the counterfactual claim in the first place. It is a descriptive step: when we make a counterfactual statement, what do we mean?

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development of a coherent counterfactual schema is a helpful step in approaching basic and very practical questions of how we advance evaluative assessments, how we structure comparisons, and how we make causal claims.

THE NEED FOR A SCHEMA FOR COUNTERFACTUAL ANALYSIS IN ACADEMIC DEBATE

Counterfactual analysis is not new, nor is it removed from our current practice of argumentation and debate. As Matt Roskoski (1992) notes, clear parallels exist between the notions of causality and counterfactual analysis. Causation implies that an effect would be lessened in some alternative, counter-to-fact situation. To say "'a' causes 'b'" is often to say "absent 'a,' there would be no 'b.'"[3] As Kahneman and Varey (1990) note, "Causal attributions invoke counterfactual beliefs, for example, about what would have happened in the absence of a putative cause" (p. 1101). Similarly, David Lewis (1979) observes, "a causal chain is a certain kind of chain of counterfactual dependencies" (p. 459).[4] Beyond being a tool of the analysts, the counterfactual proposition has also shown itself to be a reliable description of the way ordinary people in ordinary situations evaluate causal claims (Dunning & Parpal, 1989; Hilton & Slugoski, 1986; Markovitz & Vachon, 1989; Wells, Taylor, & Turtle, 1987). To a large extent, we will recast the causal assertion (e.g., "buying that new car has caused me grief") into a counterfactual forms ("I would be happier if I hadn't bought that new car").

This relationship between the counterfactual statement and causality carries two implications. Initially, it suggests that counterfactual questions should be incorporated into debate at a basic level. The importance of counterfactual questions in debate parallels the importance of causality. Since debate on most questions (policy and non-policy) generally involves the evaluation of specific conditions and arrangements, the construction of causal argument seems inevitable. If such causal claims are to be evaluated (and not simply asserted in evidenced appeals) then a consideration of the form of the causal claim is an important precondition to analysis. As Roskoski (1992) notes:

[3]The preceding represents a *necessary* causal relationship (e.g., water causes the plant to grow). In the case of a *sufficient* causal relationship (e.g., temperatures above 95 degrees cause the plant to die) we would also be concerned with uniqueness: absent 'a' *and absent any other sufficient cause* there would be no 'b.' Similarly, in the case of a *contributory* causal relationship (e.g., fertilizer causes the plant to grow) we would be concerned with a unique increment: absent 'a' there would be less 'b.'

[4]While it is safe to say that causal statements include a counterfactual element, it is not safe to assume the converse. A counterfactual statement is not necessarily causal (e.g., "If the leaves were turning color then it would be Fall" represents counterfactual reasoning from sign).

> If causal analysis is actually the central issue upon which debates should turn, and counterfactual analysis is inextricably bound up with considerations of causality, then it follows syllogistically that counterfactual analysis ought to be central to academic debate. (p. 10)

A second implication of the connection between counterfactual analysis and causality relates to proposition type. A recent survey (Church, May, 1995) indicates that fully 58% of 125 responding Cross Examination Debate Association programs either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "No fact resolutions should be included on the [C.E.D.A. topic] ballot." While the survey did not make clear what was meant by "fact resolutions" it seems likely that several recent resolutions calling for the evaluation of an existing, 'factual,' circumstance or policy arrangement are actually the objects of concern.[5] While they are perhaps not technically resolutions of fact (containing as they do a clear evaluative word or phrase) these resolutions are the ones most likely to be called "resolutions of fact" by debaters and claimed to be either true or false independent of their implied remedies. They are the resolutions that are perhaps least amenable to a conventional policy framework. It is arguably the lack of such a framework that accounts for the unpopularity of such resolutions. In the absence of a prospective dimension, debaters and coaches alike seem to lack a clear means of evaluating the proposition.

Counterfactual analysis could play a role in providing a means of evaluating propositions of this type. The proposition "Resolved: that the national news media in the United States impair the public's understanding of political issues," for example, identifies the national news media, or some manifestation thereof, as the *cause* of the impairment. To impair or "to lessen or make worse" is a comparative term and must be considered in relation to the *absence* of at least some form or trait of the national news media. To say that something impairs understanding is to say that understanding would have been better in some alternate, and hence counterfactual, situation. A similar analysis could be applied to any propositions which meets the previous description. In each case, the construction of causal arguments

[5]Some of these "factual" resolutions include:

Resolved: that the national news media in the United States impair the public's understanding of political issues (Fall, 1993).

Resolved: that the Welfare system in the United States has exacerbated the problems of the urban poor (Fall, 1992).

Resolved: that advertising degrades the quality of life in the United States (Spring 1992).

Resolved: that colleges and universities in the United States have inappropriately addressed issues of race or gender (Fall, 1991).

Resolved: that government censorship of public artistic expression in the United States is an undesirable infringement on individual rights (Fall, 1990).

regarding an existing condition will require the consideration of a possible absence or alternate version of that condition.

Counterfactual analysis thus has the potential to play a role in resolutional analysis and more generally to assist in the evaluation of causal claims. Despite this utility, however, the presentation of counterfactual claims within a debate context is often met with confusion. It seems that we are capable of handling the implicit counterfactual arguments which are contained in all causal statements with little difficulty, but when the counterfactual components of those claims become explicit, they are treated as uniquely incomprehensible arguments. Clearly what is needed is a template for understanding counterfactual claims.

In order to present a consistent analysis, this essay will focus on propositions, like the ones discussed above, which entail a negative evaluation of an historical development, a present social condition, or a policy already enacted. It is important to note, however, that while it might apply most obviously to such "resolutions of fact," counterfactual analysis is not limited to such resolutions but also applies to arguments made within all proposition types. Value claims are frequently advanced by making causal arguments about the subject under evaluation. Similarly, policy claims are justified through recourse to causal arguments about present harms and future benefits. An advantage can be seen as a statement suggesting that "if the policy were currently in force (a counterfactual condition) then a benefit would accrue." To the extent that evaluations invoke causality, counterfactual analysis will be relevant.

POSSIBLE SCHEMATA FOR COUNTERFACTUAL CLAIMS

An extensive literature contains many avenues of advice on the construction of counterfactual claims. I will consider some of these ways of handling counterfactuals as well as some of the problems which they engender. Ultimately I will suggest a possible construct that, while retaining some ambiguity, has the potential to provide a relatively clear basis for constructing counterfactual claims.

Ideal Comparison

A very common method of conceiving of counterfactual claims in academic debate up to this point has been to construct them in terms of ideals: An object, action, or condition is evaluated through a comparison to a superior or ideal form. Particularly when a resolution calls for a negative evaluation of its subject matter, that evaluation is often accomplished by contrasting the present-tense subject with a new or improved version, sometimes called a "plan." Advertising is shown to degrade the quality of life when an ideal or superior form of advertising can be demonstrated. Colleges and Universities are seen as inappropriately addressing issues of race or gender when ideal ways of addressing those issues are shown. The national news media is shown to impair understanding when better forms of media promotion of understanding can be said to have been possible. In each of these cases, the resolution's object

of focus is indicted by contrasting that evaluatum with an ideal counterfactual version of itself (better advertising, better University attention to issues of race or gender, better news media promotion of understanding).

Evaluating objects or conditions in reference to their ideal counterfactual alternatives has some obvious weaknesses. Most basically, the existence of a superior alternative does not necessarily entail that the object under evaluation is causing harm. The introduction of the alternative, in fact, causes a shift of focus from the causal attributes of the resolution's evaluatum, to the benefits of the specified alternative. Writing about the "counterfactual" which he defines as "a line of reasoning based upon comparing something with an ideal" (p. 199), Charles Willard (1987) notes the disruptive effect of this shift of focus from the evaluated condition to the ideal alternative. As Willard asserts, "counterfactuals," in the sense described above, "are best seen as argumentative devices for blasting decision-making processes off course, for suddenly transfiguring argumentative conditions. They cause rather than settle disputes; they enhance opposition, introduce competition, and throw sand in the gears of what might otherwise be smoothly functioning decision-making" (p. 204).

Apart from causing an inappropriate shift in focus, the counterfactual based on ideal comparison also introduces a bias. Functionally, if a proposition is changed from "x has caused harm" to "x can be improved" then there is an obvious bias in favor of affirmation. In calling for an emphasis on causality, Zarefsky (1977) explains the effects of an ideal counterfactual focus on the process of fair debate:

> Not only does insistence upon causal argument improve the rigor of one's own analysis, but it also improves the fairness of argumentation as a means for decision-making. If one engages in a simple comparison of existing conditions with those imagined to accompany a new proposal [she or] he compares one system *as it actually exists* with another *as a theoretical ideal*. Such a double standard produces a pro-affirmative bias, a distortion in the instrument which predisposes one toward the acceptance of new proposals and against the reaffirmation of the existing order. By contrast, to search for causes is to initiate inquiry into why the existing order is as it is. (p. 190-91)

Regarding those propositions which call for a negative evaluation of a factual condition, it seems clear that showing a counterfactual improvement in that condition does not necessarily prove that the current condition causes harm. In addition to causing a shift in focus, proposed alternatives can also be seen as *non-sequitur* responses to resolutions which ask for an evaluation of an existing condition.

Simple Absence

The evaluation of an object or an event which actually exists may be accomplished by simply considering its counterfactual absence. If the effect of an event is being assessed, for example, we look at what would have happened if that event had not occurred. As Dunning

and Parpal (1989) note, "Assessing the consequences of actions and events often requires comparing a mental simulation of the world in which the action is present to one in which the action is absent (p. 5)." This concept of absence, seems to apply quite well to the area of historical evaluation. As Rescher (1961) points out:

> Quite frequently the significance of a historical occurrence, the value of an invention or idea, or generally the contribution of some contributory cause in a composite causal chain can be assessed by carrying out a speculative thought experiment based upon the belief-contravening supposition that the events in question had not occurred. (p. 179)

Such a thought-experiment might simply remove the evaluated element in order to look at what would have happened in its absence. For example, on the national news media resolution the question would be, "what would be the state of the public's understanding in the absence of the national news media?" Given that the current media can be seen as playing an important role in *constituting* political issues (Graber, 1984), a simple absence of the national news media might arguably entail less understanding or even no understanding of these issues.

Such a position, however, may be too simplistic. Much ambiguity remains in conceptions of a world "absent" the evaluated element. When we are dealing with a complex social entity--an entity with many ties to other existing entities--a simple absence approach leaves many parts of the picture incomplete. What else about the world changes when we remove the one evaluated element? How broad is the license of an advocate to change reality in order to actuate the absence of that element? In order to address these questions we need to consider an additional concept.

'Nearest Possible World'

The notion of "simple absence" is obviously a rough sketch. The general picture of counterfactual absence requires more specificity. The implicit consideration which underlies a consideration of counterfactual absence might be captured in the expression "*ceteris paribus*" or "all other things being equal." If we are, for example, evaluating the influence of a specific event which has happened, we would consider an alternate world which lacks that event, but which is in every other respect identical to our own world. In other words, we would look at the nearest possible world in which the counterfactual is hypothetically true. An explanation of counterfactual claims involving comparison to a "nearest possible world" is generally credited independently to Robert Stalnaker (1968) and David Lewis (1973). Lewis explains:

> 'If kangaroos had no tails, they would topple over' seems to me to mean something like this: in any possible state of affairs in which kangaroos have no tails, and which resembles our actual state of affairs as much as kangaroos having no tails permits it to, the kangaroos topple over. (p. 1)

He continues,

> 'if kangaroos had no tails, they would topple over' is true (or false, as the case may be) at our world, quite without regard to those possible worlds where kangaroos walk around on crutches, and stay upright that way. Those worlds are too far away from ours. What is meant by the counterfactual is that, things being pretty much as they are - the scarcity of crutches for kangaroos being pretty much as it actually is, the kangaroos' inability to use crutches being pretty much as it actually is, and so on - if kangaroos had no tails they would topple over. (p. 8-9)

Entertaining a counterfactual statement, in and of itself, requires a departure from reality. To Lewis, the important point is that this requirement should not be taken as a license to change reality in *unnecessary* ways. To look at the effect of possible legislation on Congressional term limits, we would have to change reality enough to assume its implementation. But we would not have any logically sanctioned ability to assume any other changes in reality, for example a Democrat-dominated Congress. The world we create in order to assess the statement is the world which permits the antecedent (the evaluated condition) to be true, but which permits no additional changes from the actual world.

This solution applied to the advertising resolution would result in conceiving of the nearest possible world in which advertising is absent. Everything but the existence of advertising would be held constant as we examined the hypothetical world without it. At this point, however, ambiguity is still present. Do we look at a world in which literally *everything* else stays the same (i.e., the economy is the same size, people's brand-name recognition is at the same level)? Given the level of media saturation in our society, for example, it may be too difficult or even impossible for us to envision a world absent advertising. The conditions of the nearest possible world are still a picture only partially complete. Here it is helpful to focus on some clarifications that have been made to the concept of a "nearest possible world."

Similarity, Up To A Point

In offering a critique of the nearest-possible-world position, G. Lee Bowie (1979) provides an example of a world in which a push of a thoroughly tested and reliable button on the ultimate doomsday machine will cause the universe to explode. Assuming that we are evaluating the counterfactual proposition, "if the button is pushed, then the world will be destroyed," we would be interested in looking at a (counterfactual) world in which the button is pushed and then looking to see if the world is indeed destroyed. Bowie asserts that a nearest possible world position would prefer a world in which the button is pushed but fails to work (because it disintegrates, because a small object momentarily denies the laws of nature to fly under to button and lodge itself, etc.) over a world in which the button is pushed and does actually work, and the universe explodes. Any violation of nature required to stop the button, Bowie argues, would still be a part of a much closer world to ours than a world in which the

universe explodes. "Surely a temporary local breakdown in the laws of mechanics would preserve similarity far more than world cataclysm" (p. 485).

Rather than identifying a flaw in the nearest possible world logic, Bowie is actually pointing out that we need only be concerned with the nearness of the possible world up to a specific point. In saying that the compared counterfactual world is the "nearest possible" to the actual world, we are saying that up to a specific point, similarity must be maximized. After that, events take their course. We are absolutely unconcerned about differences which may happen after that point--they are important only in assessing the consequent, not in assessing similarity. Bowie explains,

> Fortunately, there is an easier way to meet the objection. It can be met by making clear that the world we are comparing with ours is not being compared in virtue of its temporal totality. We must require only that its history up to (and perhaps including) the time at which A is true (for counterfactual A []-> B) is most like the history of this world. In the example, we are to imagine standing in the room, finger on the button; the stage is set, and everything so far is as much as possible like things are here. At this point - I have just pushed the button - we stop worrying about how close the worlds are; we just sit back to wait and see what happens. In this case we needn't wait long - the world explodes. (p. 487)

This turning point in history, the point at which we introduce the counterfactual element, is very important to our analysis since it is the point at which we require prior similarity, but disregard posterior similarity. In evaluating the alternate world (a world, for example, absent the national news media's development of a critical press) we need to be concerned about a specific moment in history. Instead of striving for maximal closeness between possible worlds (the world with the media effect and the world without it) we would want to, according to Thomason and Gupta (1981), "maximize closeness only up to some past moment" (p. 305). Thomason and Gupta refer to this as the "condition of past predominance." In the act of evaluating a counterfactual ('if I hadn't bought my car...') we would be concerned about the entire possible history in which that counterfactual would be true. But in the act of selecting the nearest possible world which we will use to evaluate that statement (the world without my car), the condition of past predominance emphasizes that we need only be concerned with an alternate world which is as similar as possible to our actual world only up to the point under evaluation (a world exactly the same as the actual world, up to the point at which I buy my car).

"When time is brought in to the picture," Thomason and Gupta (1981) summarize, "worlds give way to evolving histories... you do not merely want to consider the closest A-world. Rather you want to consider the closest moment-history pair at which A is true" (p. 301). The propositions under consideration then would call for attention to a particular moment in history: a turning point where actual history hypothetically could be seen as changing in the direction

of the counterfactual absence of the condition under evaluation. In evaluating the effect of the welfare system on the urban poor, for example, we might look at a historical point at which services for the poor might have taken another path - might have evolved in a way other than the current welfare system.

Branching Points

In finding ways in which the real history of the evaluated object or event could have made a transition in the direction of the counterfactual under consideration, attention may turn to historical "branching points" or points at which alternative paths of development seem particularly plausible. Jon Elster (1978) addresses the issue of the historical counterfactual as a matter which is intimately tied to actual history. In assessing the causal relations surrounding a given event, he says "we are free to conduct an imaginary experiment and assume that the event in question never took place, and to ask what would then have been the further course of history " (p. 5). This freedom, however, is not wholly given over to imagination. Elster's central requirement is "that a counterfactual antecedent must be capable of insertion into the real past" (p. 184). Restated, this entails not only that we find a point in history at which we can fiat the counterfactual change, but that such a point is, historically, a "branching point," or "a point in time at which such analytical separations might seem more plausible than at other times" (Engerman, 1980, p. 164).

As a comparative concept, the notion of a branching point creates a basis for assessing the appropriateness of a comparative world. For Elster (1978), the closeness of the branching point bears directly upon the assertability of the counterfactual claim:

> If, for example, the antecedent may be inserted into the real world at t_2, whereas we must go back to an earlier time t_1 in order to find a branching point from which a permitted trajectory leads to a state where both the antecedent and the consequent obtain, then the counterfactual is not assertable. Take the statement: 'If it had not been for slavery, the GNP of the US South in 1860 would have been twice as high as it actually was.' This statement would not be assertable if a non-slave South could stem from a branching point no later than, say, 1750, whereas a GNP of the required size would require counterfactual changes going back to 1700. (p. 191)

The notion of a "nearest possible world" then is given meaning in the measurable units of time: a counterfactual is assertable if and only if an antecedent leads to the consequent when inserted into history at the closest possible branching point. "The further back we have to go in order to insert the possible state in the real history," Elster notes, "the greater is the distance to that state" (p. 191). This historical amendment to the general Stalnaker-Lewis requirement for the closeness of the possible world has the potential to play a significant role in combating the ambiguity in counterfactuals containing alternate pasts. As a social historian, Elster's reasoning focuses on utility. It is, at a basic level, most useful to conceive of the

absence (or presence) of a given condition by looking at the most recent realistic possibility for that absence (or presence) in our real history. These real historical branching points presumably are more directly applicable to our own experience than would be a contrived purely speculative solution, no matter how 'close.'

While it imparts greater clarity, Elster's requirement of counterfactual insertion into a real past has not escaped criticism. Steven Lukes (1980) calls the requirement "patently excessive" (p. 149) arguing that there are many counterfactuals which would resist insertion into a real past (e.g., If Trotsky held Stalin's post...) but which would be interesting and useful nonetheless. Lukes' point taken, it remains clear that when a counterfactual condition *is capable* of insertion into a real past, then the counterfactual claim which employs that insertion at the closest possible point retains a higher level of assertability then claims which envision insertion at a more distant, less plausible point. In addition, it must be noted that the notion of plausibility is not without problems: it is quite likely that there will be no single point which is unambiguously the only possible point or the most possible point. In an adversary setting though there is no need for an ultimate answer. The branching point becomes a creature of discourse: a construct that is supported to greater or lesser degrees by arguments relating to the plausibility of the alternative.

As a refinement to our answer, the "Branching Points" solution holds promise. We are no longer simply asked to remove the evaluated element and hold all else constant. Nor are we asked to simply chose *a* point in history. Rather, we are directed to answer the question, "what was the most recent point at which the condition under evaluation could have been avoided?" This question cannot be answered with the precision of mathematics, but only within the vagaries of discourse and argument. Nonetheless, it does provide a better foundation for argument on the given proposition type than the other possibilities.

APPLICATION

At this point, we can provide a more precise application of counterfactual analysis to the type of "factual" proposition currently under consideration. The proposition, "Resolved: that the national news media in the United States impair the public's understanding of political issues" could be negated or affirmed with the following argument.

We would start with the acknowledgement that we are comparing the current state of the national news media to its counterfactual absence (in some form). We would reject as irrelevant an analysis which compared the national news media to a new or idealized form of itself. Similarly, we would reject as too simplistic an analysis which simply "removed" the national news media from the current social picture. In comparing two worlds, we want to ensure that the counterfactual world (the world without the present national news media) is the 'nearest possible' world to our own which still permits an evaluation of that antecedent.

Knowing that these worlds need logically only be similar up to a specific point, we would want to identify a point in history at which the absence or non-development of this "national" news media could be counterfactually supposed. Knowing that there is a utility in focusing on the most recent plausible transition point at which this absence could be posited, we would consider the question, "what is the most recent historical point at which the development of a national news media could have been plausibly avoided?"

An answer could be found in research on the history of media and politics. Samuel P. Huntington (1975) for example presents the argument that a "national" media seeking to have a critical influence on the public's understanding of political issues emerged at a point in history which is at least roughly identifiable:

> The most notable new source of national power in 1970, compared to 1950, was the national media, meaning here the national TV networks, the national news magazines, and the major newspapers with national reach such as the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*... 'In the 1960's the network organizations, as one analyst [Michael L. Robinson] put it, became a 'highly creditable, never-tiring political opposition, a maverick third party which never need face the sobering experience of governing.' (pp. 98-9)

Identifying the emergence of the present form of the national news media (as oppositional media) in the 1960's, this analysis facilitates the insertion of the counterfactual non-development of that media at that point in history. While Huntington does not indicate the degree of possibility that can be attached to this *non*-development, it does stand to reason that the non-emergence of something would be more plausible at the point of emergence than at any other time. Elster's (1978) stipulation for a closest branching point could thus be met. The world in the 1960's, according to Huntington, chose a path which led to the development of oppositional media. Absent this choice, the world would have arguably taken the path of continuing its mode of operation as it had functioned in the 1950's (less national and less oppositional news).

This sets up a plausible counterfactual comparison. An advocate would be comparing the world as it presently exists (including the current "national news media") with a world as it counterfactually could have existed absent the emergence of that "national news media" at a given historical point. These two worlds are identical up to the point under consideration (the 1960's), but after that their divergence would be the subject of argument.

For example, an advocate might want to claim that the existence of a critical, oppositional national news media was a causal factor in promoting the development of the Viet Nam anti-war movement. Eyerman writes in 1992:

> Like the state and the knowledge industry, the new mass media have helped "create" the new social movements. Coverage in the mass media and the instant attention

> gained through modern communication technologies have helped build these movements into significant social and political forces and have influenced their internal strategies, organization, and leadership. As Todd Gitlen [of the Students for a Democratic Society] has documented in his brilliant account of the influence of the mass media on the development of the student movement in the United States, the media in many senses became the movement. (p. 52)

At this point, affirmative and negative strategies might diverge. Affirmatives might discuss the geo-political, environmental, and social harms of such movements while negatives might discuss their benefits in, for example, bringing the Viet Nam war to an earlier conclusion and thereby avoiding the use of nuclear weapons. I do not present this example as a perfect or irrefutable claim. In an adversary setting the appropriateness of this branching point and the conclusions drawn from it could certainly be substantively questioned. It is also certain that many other branching points and many other consequences could be identified. Rather than representing it as a "correct" solution, I use the example to show how counterfactual analysis can be used in a given situation. The function of the example is to demonstrate how the historical specification of the counterfactual turning point can provide a framework for argument. Potential answers to counterfactual questions could be found in the research on any given topic. The solution outlined here does not, of course, answer all potential concerns. Many questions remain to be addressed. An essential starting point for this discussion, however, is that we have a schema: a clear construct of what it means to advance a counterfactual argument.

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