

THE LIMITS OF THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS IN HISTORIOGRAPHY

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My starting point is that historian not only want to ascertain facts, but also want to provide explanations. As Johannes Bulhof puts it:

The study of history is not merely a study of what happened. It is a study of why something happened. Why, for example, did the South lose the American Civil War? Why did the Allies win World War II? Questions like these search for causes. (1999, p. 146-147)

But how do we establish causal relations in history? For instance (this example is taken from Bulhof 1999, p. 147): how can we argue that the inability to develop atomic weapons was one of the causes of the German defeat? For lack of other (e.g. experimental) methods, historians often rely on thought experiments: they ask what would have happened if the putative cause would have been present (if the putative cause is a negative fact, like the inability to develop atomic bombs) or absent (if it is a positive fact).

The aim of this paper to investigate the power and limits of thought experiments in historiography. I will argue that thought experiments are suited only for causal claims that can be interpreted as probabilistic causal claims about populations. The power of thought experiments is based on such an interpretation. The structure of the paper is as follows. In Section 2 I discuss probabilistic causation and causal inference in the social sciences, to serve as contrast case. In Section 3 I clarify what it means to give historical causal claims a probabilistic interpretation and point out the advantages of such interpretation. In Section 4 I discuss some famous examples of thought experiments in history, and show that only the ones that relate to causal claims that can be “probabilified” can be convincing. In Section 5 I compare this position with a rival view developed by Robyn Dawes, which regards good thought experiments as instances of statistical reasoning. I point to problems with the latter view.