



*What if... heritage,  
businesses and cities  
were seen through  
alternative histories? –  
some reflections from  
the Round Table #3  
chair*

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# What if... heritage, businesses and cities were seen through alternative histories? – some reflections from the Round Table #3 chair

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HYPOTHESIS  
HISTORIA  
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**Abstract.** In this article a brief reflection will be made around the presentations that made up Round Table #3 of the First International Conference of ‘What if?...’ World History (WhatIf’21). Thus, we propose to present an individualistic/personal approach to the themes, discussions and topics raised during each of the presentations. Such choice is due to the fact that we consider that in some disciplinary areas - such as Sociology, among others - the use of alternative histories is not yet a common practice to think about the most diverse dimensions of social life. Thus, we intend - with the writing of this article - to contribute to the promotion of interest on this area/methodology/way of (re)thinking contemporary societies.

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Keywords: Alternative Histories; Social Change; Cultural Heritage; Business Process Reengineering; Urban Planning.

## 1. Introduction

This paper results from an experience as a moderator of the Round Table about the multiple uses and applications of alternative histories in contemporary societies, ranging from cultural heritage, business models and local histories.

As we were writing this text, we realised that what was underlying in this discussion focused, above all, on aspects of social and cultural change, and on aspects inherent to the notion of heritage. In that sense, the three presentations that made up the Round Table #3, presuppose three distinct types of approaches, namely social and cultural change, and heritage. In fact - and taking advantage of this initial section of our article - we considered it important to briefly reflect on our experience as moderators/chairs, especially because we found it very conceptually challenging. Firstly, we quickly realized that our knowledge about alternative storytelling and alternative histories, its potentialities and challenges, was scarce. In this sense, we can have as an example the first communication made by Rui Macário Ribeiro, regarding a project located in Viseu – a Portuguese city located in the *Centro* region of Portugal - , which was unknown to us, despite the geographical proximity. Such ignorance made us realize that, on one hand, the hallucinating rhythms of work and the capitalist demands of systematic production deprive us of time for research, for searching and for satisfying scientific curiosity; something that is, to a certain extent, frightening and reveals a lot about ourselves, namely the lack of time. On the other hand, it made us see the importance of alternative histories in the face of social (re)configuration processes, in the sense that it broadened our intellectual horizons, i.e., it made evident the urgency of us – as sociologists and academics – to think beyond what is institutionally accepted, valued, or promoted. Looking back at our academic journey - and based on these

reflexive points - we cannot help but to think that as sociologists and social scientists, we are losing our essence by not valuing alternative histories, which can be translated in the loss of knowledge regarding new and innovative tools and methodologies of doing empirical research. In this sense, the concept of ‘alternative history’ is being misused or misconnoted by us, since the term/concept ‘alternative’ implied the existence of a norm, something that seems to us somewhat castrating and discriminatory. The reference to the existence of a norm implies that we recognise the idea that what is regarded as ‘alternative’ is seen as strange, irregular, or wrong. In other words, the ‘alternative’ is often taken up as an opposition, and the presentations that made up this Round Table emphasise the ‘alternative’ as a second life, i.e., as another way of doing, of perceiving and of showing, escaping the norm and massification; it also affects empirical research in the social sciences. So, from our understanding, these presentations - as well as the WhatIf’21 Congress - allowed for the possibility of giving voice to the *other*, to everything that is taken as ‘alternative’ to the norm, which, in fact, is the result of *other* social experiences and, at the same time, allows us to remember the purpose of the sociologist: to see beyond the horizon line.

With this brief background, in the following sections we will present, discuss and reflect on the presentations that made up Round Table #3<sup>1</sup>, namely the presentation by Rui Macário Ribeiro entitled “10 years into the Fake Museum as a Cultural Heritage Assessment Model”, that of Cynthia Montaudon, Ingrid López and Anna Amsler, under the title “Business process reengineering

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1 The Oral Presentations Round Table #3 of What-If’21 can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KapkQ7kcmX0>

(BPR) using alternate histories” and, finally, we will have the presentation of Bastian Vergnon “The alternative history of the Upper Palatinate. An example for new perspectives of local history”.

## 2. The role of alternative histories in ‘making’ cultural heritage

We began this section with a question posed by Holtorf [1]: will it be possible in the future to appreciate the heritage of heritage? It seems to us that the presentation made by Rui tries to give an answer, albeit an ‘alternative’ one. We might even frame his presentation as an alternative view of the heritage of heritage, taking the terms presented by Holtorf [1]. What is underlying here is the fact that the studies that have been carried out throughout the years tend to divide cultural heritage and heritage management processes, which in turn generates two distinct perspectives on historical approaches, i.e., two different research and theoretical focuses. In a way, the mobilisation of social agents in the construction of the idea of cultural heritage, thus creating several ‘Lives’ referring to the history of Viseu, aims to promote a rupture between these two approaches, while establishing the alternative history of the city’s heritage.

The Fake Museum appeared in 2012 - in Viseu, Portugal - under the design of the City Museum, and counting on the contributions solely made by contemporary creators and social agents. The Fake Museum is guided by a kind of shuttle between what is ‘Fake’ and what is ‘True’, thus providing two lines of action: the first, directed towards artistic creation, and the second related to revisiting and rethinking processes of local history. As Ribeiro, Castro and Duarte [2] state, there is an underlying idea of a *simulacrum* of the reality and of cultural heritage to this project, something that goes against the idea of mass art.

In the speaker’s speech, the idea became clear

that it is not art - that which is institutionalised - that has harmful effects on the conception and identification of something as heritage; on the contrary, what was stated was that art, in the context of the Fake Museum, reflects a place of creation or presentation which, in turn, comes from and is based on the identification and construction of alternative stories and, subsequently, alternative ways of telling, showing and reporting them. According to Roymans et al [3], the life history perspective in relation to cultural heritage has been something that has attracted a lot of attention in recent times, because it has to do with approaches that argue that landscapes and monuments have lives, during which they experience distinct episodes and experiences, some of them even leaving physical marks. Perhaps this is why the authors [2, 4, 5] stated that each exhibition that was organized in the Fake Museum, referred to the assumption of life and the act of living, and to the idea of heritage as an identity and as a bearer of value.

For Shouyong [6] museums should be understood as a symbol of civilizations, as well as a cultural instrument. Indeed, it is often through museums that mediation processes are carried out in relation to societies’ values, whether from a cultural, economic, or political point of view, which can be materialized in collections, exhibitions, or cultural programs. It seemed patent to us the idea that the Fake Museum asserts itself as a means of alternative mediation of the Portuguese society in general, and of the city of Viseu in specific, because it contradicts the idea of the museum as a ‘book on the wall’, which means that it breaks with the generalist idea of development and organization of museums according to historical materialism, nationalism, or cultural identity. Thus, instead of the focus of approach and action being from the macro (society) to the micro (individual) level - the so-called top-down projects -, this process is

inverted, and then the focus of heritage - in the concept of heritage or cultural heritage - becomes centered on the experience and conceptualisation of individuals or, in this case, of specific social agents, such as artists, among others.

To a certain extent, the Fake Museum fits in the contemporary processes of *artification* [7], in the sense that it avoids the typical question ‘What is art? Indeed, Goodman [8] posed this question in the 1970s, when he stated that art could not be defined by its essence, but rather that art is a category that must be defined in reference to its context and modes of use. The same logic applies to this process of artification, since context and use are determinant. In fact, the alternative histories represented in this Fake Museum designate this link between context and use, since they refuse the institutional definition of the contexts and uses of art, seeking instead to recreate other narratives, and forcing us to put ourselves in the place of the *other*. As some authors argue [6, 7], only in this way can we find common values that, when combined or presented, may originate new ways of preservation and creation of tangible and intangible cultural heritages. Thus, we can only pose one question: how will these alternative histories be read, seen and interpreted in the future? Moreover, in what way will they be incorporated?

### **3. Are alternative histories the future of business models? A preliminary approach**

Going back to the questioning made in the previous section, we were able to set the tone for this second part of our reflection: the management of change. It is here that Cynthia’s presentation becomes decisive. Although Cynthia’s talk was directed towards the business world, it is still connected to Rui’s work, as well as to Bastian’s presentation - which we will discuss next - es-

pecially because in both cases the focus is on the optimisation of alternative stories as a means of promoting better practices.

For the author [8], alternative stories have been widely used so that individuals, within an organizational context, can understand and/or intervene in complex situations, thus providing new ways of action and problem solving. What stood out - from an individual perspective - was the fact that alternative histories are implemented in this corporate context as a means of fostering community ties, as well as to promote the creation of sharing networks. By stating that alternative stories [8] derive from the past, the author enhances that fact that they can have countless and infinite materializations in the future, also because these alternative histories have a cause-effect logic to them.

As we mentioned, the main interest of the presentation made by Cynthia lies in the promotion of a change in organisational culture, and that the very individuals that make up this corporate universe can and will be the agents of change. The use of alternative history in Cynthia’s presentation is in line with the contributions of authors such as Peterson [9], especially when he states that alternative histories may be an effective method to demonstrate how accidents or split-second decisions may have profound impacts, which are even more evident in companies with business models, and may even dictate their end. In this sense, two points of approach emerge that seem decisive to us: 1) the first refers to management processes, because the use of alternative stories, in our point of view, can (and should) give an opening to other types of businesses and management models, based on the co-creation of solutions and on group sharing; in this way, besides involving the collaborator in the decision making processes, they are also promoting his/her interest and commitment to the business, also because interdependence relations are created at several

levels; 2) on the other hand, the use of alternative stories - as a management model and as an organisational model - may allow the reduction of risks and the minimisation of impacts in the medium and long term. Thinking about the case of the pandemic caused by the coronavirus, could it be that if some companies or organisations had implemented this method at an early stage of development of their business, they could not have prepared for various scenarios where the pandemic would have profound impacts? This is particularly important, because they would have to analyse the past and events similar in order to be prepared. Couldn't other ways of mitigating the consequences of the pandemic have been found? Well, these are questions that arise and that we leave here for an eventual answer. Maybe this is something that we'll have to consider in future researches, i.e., think about the future while using alternative histories.

Finally, another added value of the work of Cynthia and her colleagues is related to the question of applicability [9, 10]: there are several works in which they present a model of application, evaluation and validation of alternative histories in corporate and/or business models. In fact, it is from this applicability that it becomes vehement the importance of the use of alternative stories in various dimensions of social life, such as the management of community associations or even in formal education itself, among others. It is an effective form of scenario planning [9, 11], which adapts and shapes itself to the unpredictability of the world and, in turn, to the unpredictability of individual and collective experiences.

#### **4. From urban planning to *alternative* urban planning: resistance and social and urban change**

Continuing with the approach of a vis-à-vis man-

agement processes, Bastian's communication is situated more deeply in the geographical context itself, namely in the Upper Palatinate, one of the administrative regions of Lower Bavaria. In fact, the context is present in all three of the presentations, however different the theoretical and empirical approaches. Given the geographical context of the region, as well as the strong connection of domination by the Roman Empire, alternative histories appear in this work as a means of reconfiguring what is considered as local history, but also as a vehicle for understanding and foster of processes of rediscovery of what are the hidden faces of the region's local history. Then, as in the works described above, alternative history emerges as a means of promoting a deeper understanding about the decisions that were made in the past in relation to the Upper Palatinate, but it also asserts itself as an explanatory matrix of opportunities in the present.

Throughout his presentation, Bastian refers to several historical events that took place and that which, had they not happened, the Upper Palatinate area might now be under the control of the Czech Republic. More recently, towards the end of the 1970s, there was an intention to destroy buildings that were abandoned or in poor condition due to the war, to make the city car oriented and, in that sense, make it more attractive. In essence, this presentation opened the door to a discussion around the role those alternative histories have, but in this case, being them directed towards urban planning, with the construction of a university in the 1990s being a highlight. The construction of the Technical University of Applied Sciences was undoubtedly a growth driver for the city, in the sense that it fostered interest in the city, but also increased the flow of individuals.

In effect, what we want to demonstrate and what we've questioned after the presentation of

Bastian, is that urban planning has a decisive role in defining the history of a geographical context and also its history, something that becomes all the more evident when Bastian asks, at a certain point in his presentation, what would have happened if the University had not been built and if, on the other hand, it had adopted the typology of making the city more car oriented? At this level, it is also important to highlight those social actors have a decisive place in the discussion and the writing of these alternative histories, something that is even more evident when we are given the message that it was the revolt of the residents of that city against the construction of a motorway that later dictated the construction of the University.

In brief, we can also see latent the idea mentioned in the previous section, about the possibilities of using the alternative history in scenario planning [8, 11, 12] and, in parallel, it was also made evident that the alternative history can be used for several purposes, even because its presentation was more directed to the spectator, that is, to ask himself about the possible scenarios: what if the motorway had been built instead of the University? And what if, instead of the University, another infrastructure had been built, such as an airport, for example? In fact, we can already say that as far as urban planning is concerned, the focus should be placed on the cities' inhabitants and not on the political-institutional entities, because the resulting alternative histories emerge and are articulated - in the strict sense - with urban and daily ways of living, modes of spatial appropriation, but also - and ultimately - with elements related to social cohesion, among others.

## Final remarks

What it became possible to ascertain with the writing of this reflective text, was that alternative history can be used for purposes we did not even know, from cultural heritage to organ-

izational/corporate models, to urban planning. For Gallagher [12], alternative history should be seen as a counter narrative based on a kind of civic responsibility, this is because we are often constructing fictions in relation to historical figures or elements, emphasizing the idea that every action has a consequence and that nothing happens in societies in a unilateral way. Moreover, it also became clear in all the presentations that alternative histories should be used to understand the progress.

Another aspect that was assumed transversally in the three presentations, was the intentional idea that the reader or the social agent has a universe of endless possibilities, i.e., for each scenario, there is a tiny framework of universes, agents, and options that, based on past events, have the ability to change the present and the future, namely the idea and conception of heritage, the business management models or the urban planning logics.

Given these three contexts of application of alternative histories, presented here, we can refer that these narratives offer us a deeper 'dive' into those that are scenarios, thus meeting the objective of this first International Conference of 'What if?...' World History (WhatIf'21) and its theme, namely 'Gamification and Alternative History'. In this way, we can affirm that these presentations that made up Round Table #3 were centered around the promotion of the multiple divergent realities that culminate in the creation of strategies and the promotion of debates around the construction of self- and hetero awareness of the historical past of the contemporary and its implications in the present and in the future.

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