

Looking Backwards to the Future: Studying the Future with Counterfactuals

Workshop at @Snellius 11 Feb 2019 through 15 Feb 2019

This groundbreaking workshop brought together researchers from a diverse set of disciplines (natural sciences, social sciences, engineering, design, humanities) to discuss theory and methods of using counterfactuals (and related techniques such as counterfactual history, futures studies, scenario analysis etc.) to study the future. The workshop was structured around three themes; 1) Counterfactuals and futuring techniques, 2) Counterfactuals and the creative arts, and 3) Counterfactuals in relation to energy and sustainability. The workshop consisted of short presentations and dialogues on these themes as well as practical (hands-on) exercises meant to make the three themes more tangible and concrete. The workshop goals were more specifically to:

1. Survey the field (how *have* counterfactuals been used and how *could* they be used?).
2. Explore commonalities and differences (taking the diversity of participants as a starting point to try to unveil shared or different/hidden/conflicting assumptions about the future and about futuring).
3. Identify paths for collaboration and cross-fertilization (is it possible to construct a unified model that would be useful for opening up new spaces for critical research?)

The workshop was a success and a tangible outcome of the workshop will be a summary journal paper that we have already started to work on. There are also plans for writing an edited book with chapters from workshop participants and possibly from other invited researchers (who were identified at the workshop).

Many participants expressed their delight in taking part of this multidisciplinary workshop, and some new collaborations formed around research grant applications as well as a follow-up workshop (possibly applying to the Lorentz Center). Furthermore the cross fertilization between different academic fields of research and between various participants did elicit aha-moments for many of the participants. For example some participants expressed that they went from thinking that counterfactuals are an interesting thought experiment to viewing them as something they could use as a methodology in futuring activities. There were also discussions about how to operationalize counterfactual thinking in a game format so as to more easily guide others into thinking about the future. At the end of the workshop, participants were highly energized and it felt like the beginning of something new, rather than the ending of a intensive week. It could be that a budding research network was formed during the week of the workshop and most participants have now joined a shared workspace in the platform "Slack".

The organisation of the workshop ran smoothly, although and despite generous time allocated for discussions, the workshop ran late at times. There was good balance between short pre-organized presentations, discussions in break-out sessions and 'provocations' (mini-workshops within the workshop where we for example participated in design exercises and played a game). The support from the Lorentz center (the premises, the food, the bicycles, the workshop materials) was excellent, and it was an honour to be part of this scientific scene.

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