

Possible Pasts, Probable Futures
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We can look back on history and find so many small events, which, if they had been different, would have changed everything. Here are four examples:

- 1) The timing of the birth of Napoleon on Corsica, right after the island was ceded to France, gave him a path to become ruler of that country.
- 2) During the American Civil War, an order from General Lee laying out plans for the invasion of Maryland was lost and happened to be discovered by a Union soldier, allowing the North to set up a defense that ultimately led to the Battle of Antietam. Lee's second attempt to invade the North also failed, culminating in the Battle of Gettysburg.
- 3) When Hitler was a young man, he applied to art school in Vienna but was rejected, after which he started to get involved with extremist politics.
- 4) During the Cuban Missile Crisis, one of the officers on a Soviet submarine, Vasili Arkhipov, refused to agree to the launch of a nuclear torpedo at the American blockade of Cuba, probably preventing the outbreak of nuclear war.

The point can be examined on a smaller level too. One might as well ask what if Lee's parents just never met, or what if Arkhipov just happened to have been assigned to another vessel? The possibilities for divergence from the timeline we know are infinite, and yet this is the timeline we have.

What Drives History?

The real question is whether things could have happened any other way. Maybe each event happens the way it does because all the events around it happened the way they did; they're all the result of conditions that were already in place. On the other hand, maybe each event is determined by the luck of the draw. In that case, it's just a fluke we're at the end of our particular timeline, just one out of infinity. But if even the smallest change can have far reaching consequences, it's hard to say that anything could have happened any differently because then maybe it would have.

We probably just have to look deeper. It may be that this seemingly unchangeable patchwork of infinite minor events is actually just the outward sign of something happening far below the surface. Small events may be able to change everything, but there may also be something else determining whether a given small event happens. There may in fact be currents in history, powered by the interplay between human nature and the rest of the world, that drive everything above. Regardless of the details playing out on the surface, the deeper currents of history may ultimately push everything to similar outcomes.

To return to the earlier examples, the weak succession of governments that ruled France leading up to Napoleon probably would have been overthrown by some strongman, and the other European powers still would have wanted to put an end to the French Republic, even if he never became leader. Likewise, the industrial and manpower advantage of the North would have eventually overcome the

South, regardless of whether the North was able to stop Lee's Maryland campaign when it did. Moreover, while Hitler may have spent his life contentedly as a painter, another dictator would have risen to power in Germany because conditions there were ripe for it. Finally, Arkhipov giving in to his fellow officers may have ignited a nuclear war in the 60s, but one might be inevitable anyway given the enormous stockpiles of nuclear weapons in the world and the many opportunities for a diplomatic crisis, lunatic rising to power, miscalculation, or accident setting them off. Considering the total destruction that would result, a few decades one way or the other doesn't make much difference.

Because there's no way to really know what is going on from where we stand, however, it's better to assume events can be changed. To assume otherwise means giving up any chance we might have had to direct them. In addition, while the currents of history may be indifferent to each event, all the flotsam can have a great effect on our lives individually. It is useful to at least try to take in the whole picture because it may tell us where we're going and give us a perspective on the much larger tapestry, which in itself can be empowering, or at the very least, interesting and entertaining.

The currents of history are easier to notice looking backwards, but we still might be able to see where they are carrying us. The big determining factor right now is industrialization, which seems to present us with several possible paths.

Where are We Going?

The Industrial Revolution was the most incredible event in history. For the thousands of years before that, humans mainly survived by farming and got most of their power from animals. For tens of thousands of years before that, they were hunter-gatherers and relied on stone-age technology. But by the 20th century, suddenly humans had things like airplanes, spaceships, computers, and nuclear power. Suddenly they were wiping out diseases, remaking the entire landscape, and connecting the whole world. While it took 100,000 years to go from walking to horseback riding, and thousands more to go from horses to biplanes, it took less than 100 after that to reach other planets.

What is the significance of this extraordinary development? Did the Industrial Revolution bring about a permanent change in the human condition, or did unusual circumstances, such as climactic changes that favored mass agriculture and the discovery of coal and oil, converge to create a unique and temporary situation that will ultimately revert back to the way things always were? This is one of the biggest questions for the future of the species. The way we live now is obviously totally unsustainable. Looking at issues like the depletion of natural resources, overpopulation, and the degradation of the environment, industrial civilization certainly seems to be on shaky ground. On the other hand, the power and technology at the disposal of humans today as well as the speed of change is totally unprecedented, so one cannot be at all sure that the current civilization will follow the same old pattern of rise and fall.

We can say that the trajectory of history over the last couple hundred years leaves us with three general possible futures:

One possibility is that humans will somehow get their act together. Consumption will be greatly reduced, the birthrate will come way down, energy will be used much more efficiently, and it will be generated from renewable sources. However, there's no sign of anything like this happening on a big enough scale to remake the system, to dam and divert the currents carrying us forward.

Another possibility is that we will basically be saved from above. Before industrial civilization fails, space technology may get good enough and cheap enough that humans will start expanding into and gathering resources from other parts of the solar system. However, human spacefaring capabilities actually seem to be regressing in some ways. For one thing, there has not been a manned mission beyond low earth orbit in over 40 years, and the space shuttle was retired just to return to more conventional rockets. Another way industrial civilization might be saved is through exotic technologies being developed and implemented. One example is fusion power, which would provide effectively a limitless source of energy. Another is some iteration of 3D printing that could allow the production of goods without the traditional gathering of raw materials and manufacture. However, unless there is truly a Manhattan Project-scale effort to achieve something like this, it isn't much more promising than just hoping for a miracle.

A final possibility is that industrial civilization will decline like those that came before it. This may happen gradually over decades and centuries as more and more of its elements slowly fall away and ultimately people again find themselves plowing fields behind a horse. On the other hand, it may decline catastrophically, such as in a nuclear war that erupts over competition for remaining resources.

Most people live as though the world we know today will continue on forever, which is probably how most people always lived. It may be that we are just getting swept along by an historical current beyond individual action and that this will determine the course we take for us. However, even in that case, the details are still important in our individual lives, and how badly we suffer and how much is lost may still be in our hands.