Fearon's "Causes and Counterfactuals in Social Science

Two main problems involving the questions of whether and how counterfactuals should be used by social scientists:

--First, how can we know with any confidence what would have happened if the hypothesized causal factor had been absent?

***Fearon argues that most social science problems simply cannot be "known," in principle. The difficulties involved in peering into possible worlds put fairly strong constraints on how much solid empirical confirmation one can obtain from any conceivable method of counterfactual argument.

--Second, for *too many* factors A it can be plausibly argued that but for A, B would not have occurred. How does one select among all the possibilities? Why is it not completely arbitrary to select one factor and argue for its causal status on counterfactual grounds if similar arguments can be advanced for myriad other factors and events? Are there criteria by which some counterfactual antecedents should be judged legitimate while others should not be considered because they are illegitimate to vary counterfactually as potential causes?

Fearon's two main arguments:

--First, when a social scientist contends that "A caused B," he/she seems to mean not just that if A had not occurred, B would not have occurred. Rather, what is meant is that if A had not occurred, B would not have occurred and the world would otherwise be similar to the world that did occur.

--Second, what a social scientist understands by "cause" differs in different explanatory environments and problems. What one accepts as a cause differs according to whether we are trying to give causes of a particular historical event, or of a class of events.

***In the case of particular events, we seek what Fearon calls *conceivable causes*, factors that could actually have been different, according to the best of our knowledge about how the social and physical worlds work.

***When we argue that a particular factor causes some event across cases, we do not typically require that in each case it be actually or "objectively possible" that the factor not occur. This is what Fearon calls *miracle causes*.

***Thus, giving the causes of a singular event and of a clas of events may be different sorts of explanatory exercises, and what can be legitimately accepted as a counterfactual antecedent may differ according to the exercise. The implication is that a researcher's purpose of inquiry may reasonably determine what factors should or should not be varied counterfactually, and thus what the causes of the phenomenon are.

Fearon is rather pessimistic about the possibility and usefulness of any method of counterfactual argument. Its chief problem is that its domain would necessarily be very narrow. Using his analogy of the cellular automaton, he concludes that for typical social science problems we will only be able to judge the plausibility of counterfactual arguments for highly "local" situations. WE WILL BE ABLE TO ASSESS

PLAUSIBILITY ONLY WHERE THE COUNTERFACTUALS INVOKE CAUSAL MECHANISMS AND REGULARITIES THAT ARE WELL UNDERSTOOD AND THAT ARE CONSIDERED AT A SPATIAL AND TEMPORAL RANGE SMALL ENOUGH THAT MULTIPLE MECHANISMS DO NOT INTERACT.

***Specifying and exploring the counterfactuals implied by a causal claim forces one to be clear about 1) the precise delimitation of the event being explained, 2) the "contrast space" or set of alternative outcomes from which the event that occurred is explained, and 3) the type of causes one is looking for.