What Was to Have Happened? Tenses for a Cancelled Future

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In the summer of 2020, students across the UK received some unusual test results. Like many students around the world, they hadn't been able to sit their A-Level (Year 13) exams, thanks to the coronavirus pandemic. Yet, their futures – their places at university or further education, and the career and life paths that might follow from these places – still depended on grades from the exams they hadn't taken.

Teachers were instructed to produce predicted grades for the students, and given methods by which to do so. Months after having set this predictive method in place, however, government regulators got cold feet about it, because of grade inflation. The average predicted test scores were higher than the typical yearly averages – perhaps due to factors such as nerves on exam days, which teachers could not so readily predict. This was no small problem: a slight inflation had the power to throw university admissions significantly out of whack across the country, with the numbers of students now qualified to attend their top choice institutions outnumbering available places.

How to solve this dilemma? Enter the Ofqual algorithm. Now widely decried as "shockingly unfair", this algorithm downgraded nearly 40% of all A-Level results across the country, using a method that privileged a school's past performance over student effort or teachers' predictions. This meant that a bright, hardworking student from an underperforming school (or even a very recently improved one) would likely have their results downgraded. Students from better-funded private schools, which tend to have strong exam results, would have been less likely to be downgraded. The algorithm even failed some students simply because, based on the school's performance over the past three years, it should have had at least one fail from the current year. Widespread student protests, featuring spot-on slogans like "Fuck the Algorithm", eventually forced the government into yet another embarrassing U-turn: they dropped the downgraded results and went back to the teacher's predictions. One student, interviewed on BBC Newsnight about the exams debacle, remarked that Gavin Williamson, the Conservative Secretary of State for Education who presided over the fiasco, clearly hadn't considered what it might be like to be downgraded by an algorithm, having one's life chances cut short simply for studying at a disadvantaged school; surely, society would be far better run by politicians who had the empathy and imagination to think beyond the bounds of their own privilege.

The students' incisive slogans and clear-sighted commentary pointed toward something shared by many scholars: a concern for the politics of automated predictions. As Louise Amoore, one of the most astute critics of computational predictive methods, put it in an op-ed for *The Guardian*, "the Ofqual algorithm was the technical embodiment of a deeply political idea: that a person is only as good as their circumstances dictate." While it was never going to be possible to perfectly predict the grades, at least the teachers had openly debated the fairest methodologies. The algorithm, on the other hand, was ill-conceived and unaccountable. Its logic, as Amoore writes, "runs counter to democratic politics, which

express the contingency of the world and the deliberative nature of collective decision-making."

The Ofqual algorithm, a relatively simple methodology, had a serious design flaw (baking in previous school attainment bias) and devastatingly real consequences. The anger at its failure, however, points beyond the 2020 grading fiasco, toward a wider field of ever more opaque and unaccountable predictive apparatuses, which all too often – funnily enough – seem predisposed to exacerbate existing inequalities. This theme recurs in many important critiques of predictive methodologies and algorithmic governance.1

The pervasive tendency for predictive algorithms – from the relatively simple to the most complex, black-boxed, machine learning methods – certainly bears critiquing. But there's another dimension to the Ofqual algorithm that merits further analysis: the tense structures implied by their modes of prediction. The exam algorithm was not predicting in the simple future tense – what *will* happen, what *might* happen, what *could* happen – as predictive apparatuses often do. They were positing a much more grammatically, temporally and conceptually complex proposition: if the exams *had* gone ahead, what *would* this student have gotten? Or, to put it slightly differently: *What was to have happened* with the exam results*?*

The first construction – *what would have happened*? – is sometimes referred to in English grammar as a Type 3 conditional, or a past unreal conditional sentence. That means a counterfactual or hypothetical claim with its main, *if* clause rendered in the past perfect (if x *had* happened), and its subordinate *then* clause in the perfect conditional (then y *would have* happened). The latter – *what was to have happened*? – is even more complex. It's similar to the past unreal conditional, in that it looks back from the vantage point of the present, to a moment in the past which seemed to have had a different future laid out before it – except that a turn of events came along, which made this moment's apparent future impossible to carry out. Yet, "What *was to have* happened?" absolutizes the past unreal conditional proposition, layering it with a normative expectation of inevitability that has since been thwarted. "Was to have" veers toward "should" – as if a certain cancelled future, having seemed nigh on inevitable, was the one that was *supposed to* play out in the first place. A once-assumed inevitability has, in spite of itself, been eclipsed.

Perhaps it could be said that this tense structure represents something of an anomaly within the vast field of predictive apparatuses (computational and otherwise) that pervasively operationalize the future, in this moment variously labelled the 'age of big data', or the 'age of financialized capitalism'. To be fair, it's a 'highly unusual' year (even if 'highly unusual' seems set to become all the more usual in coming years). It's highly unusual that the grades that *would have been* are yet still needed, to oil the machine of meted-out merits opening apertures of admission and progression on which a society's quasi-meritocratic signature flow of cultivated talents, expectations, lives, and fates has been built. It's not normal that grades would have had to be predicted in this way. Surely, it might be said, the vast majority of the myriad predictive apparatuses instrumental to financialized "risk societies" (to borrow Ulrich Beck's term) and embedded in daily life presume simpler forms of futurity, however complex they may be. When calculating the value of a derivative contract, or deciding who is a viable credit risk, questions of what *will* likely happen – or even (in possibilistic, rather than probabilistic valuation models), what *could* happen – are the norm and not the exception. The simpler future tenses hold – even if (as Randy Martin so eloquently argued in *Knowledge LTD: Toward a Social Logic of the Derivative,* 2015) the predictive models that posit them

constantly come up against the edges of their own performativity, skewing the very fields of futurity in which they purport to be mere observers, and thus reaching the inherent limits of the knowledge they claim to produce. The simpler future tenses hold – even if, as Joshua Ramey argued in *Politics of Divination* (2016), neoliberalism profoundly profanes the impulse to divination, not so much predicting the future as extending today's norms and expectations outwards, and thereby refashioning the future as a blank repetition of the demands of the present.

Yet, I would like to argue, the "*what was to have happened?*" mode of prediction is coming into its own. Maybe it's even emerging as a paradigmatic predictive modality of the coming decade. This absolutized mood of the past unreal conditional deserves much more attention in discussions of the predictive predilections of the present, for it is the very tense structure of the cancelled future.

Once upon a time, the past unreal conditional tended to be expressed in terms of the personal life, focusing new forms of narrative attention on life paths that have remained unled. For instance, in *The Jolly Corner* (1908), Henry James writes an extended hallucination of a life unlived: a ghost version of his character Spencer Brydon, as he *would have been*, had he remained in New York throughout his adult life. As Peter Rawlings has argued, this narrative fascination with unled lives answers to increased class mobility in the modern period. The newfound focus on what lives could have been voiced the increased range of choices and dilemmas that accrued around the life path.

What of the absolutized past unreal conditional now? On the one hand, we might say that predictive apparatuses – which sometimes find themselves veering into the past unreal conditional – actualize life paths and leave others unled on an industrial scale. The exams debacle reveals the strange, bell-curve thinking that metes out opportunity, and ferries between the contradicting plutocratic and meritocratic connotations of narratives of achievement that form in the face of increasingly unequal societies. On the other hand, however, we might say that, given the level of mass-scale, infrastructural, financial and environmental collapse that seems to be coming, the tenses of the cancelled future take on a profoundly different resonance: departing altogether from the scale of personal uncertainty and upheaval in a few, relatively privileged, narrated lives, and veering toward infrastructural, political, societal breakdown. How do you calculate insurance for industries that have backed themselves into an ecological corner, depleting the stocks on which they depend to such an extent that they have rendered both themselves and their industrial-scale prey extinct? How do you underwrite a mortgage on a property anywhere near a coastline, where climate change-fuelled mass flooding is likely to pull the land under, one of these decades fairly soon? What do you do with prediction-fuelled markets, when the coronavirus pandemic has upended volatility hedge funds – the very funds designed to profit from turbulent market conditions? In a moment in which climate crisis invalidates insurance policies; volatility hedge funds are unable to deal with the volatility caused by the coronavirus pandemic; and permanent jobs become ever scarcer, I wouldn't be surprised at all to find more algorithms fumbling around in the past unreal conditional – trying to mete out *what was to have happened* in compensation for a systems breach, attempting to keep things running as they should have, might have, were to have been – in spite of the pesky quagmires of the present that made it impossible for the all-but-expected advances to have been won. Fishing around in the past unreal conditional becomes a necessary condition for prediction in the present: necessary insofar as it's needed to feed in inputs that keep the

current systems running – for a little while longer at least – in spite of the burgeoning sense that these systems might otherwise have already expired.

In an essay on art and algorithms, Timotheus Vermeulen argued that, while many algorithms operate in the "what if?" mode – departing from a known present in search of a possible future – some artists (and others) have worked with what Vermeulen terms altergorithms: algorithms that enact an *as if* mode of thinking. Starting from an actual future *– as if it were this way –* they then find paths from this future back toward the virtual present, toward "uncertain and unstable points of departure." I like this hopeful predictive modality, this subjunctive-predictive mood that Vermeulen points to. But it's important, I think, to situate this subjunctive form of searching in relation to the more exhausted, cancelled modes of futurity that belong to the past unreal conditional. The "*what was to have happened*?" mode of prediction is witness to the collapse of system regularities and the (cruelly optimistic?) dreams that found themselves, perhaps unwittingly, entangled in their cogs. In a moment that seems (if I had to predict) poised to produce much more wide-scale trauma in the coming years, with climate breakdown, climate apartheid, a pandemic and its financial meltdowns, and ever-grosser levels of wealth inequality heading this way, and hitting the world's already disadvantaged far harder in the process, perhaps one must start from the traumatized, shell-shocked predictive mode of the "*was to have happened?*" – the impetus to simply grease the cogs, to try to keep things going for a little while longer. Perhaps one must start from this, and try to think of the *was to have happened* as a traumatized predictive mode that seeks to smooth over the impossibility of this present, seen as simply the sum of the past's predictions. Doing so might clear the ground, for trying to think of the present as something other than this sum total of now untenable past predictions.

1 See *Against Prediction* (2007) by Bernard Harcourt, Frank Pasquale's *Black Box Society* (2016) or Cathy O'Neill's *Weapons of Math Destruction* (2016).