What-Matters in Politics (2)

Some Preliminary Thoughts on How to Think Globally About Politics and Political Thought

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5 The Notion of What-Matters

"What-matters" is presented as a neologism—hence the hyphen. My aim in coining this term is to provide a reference point or conceptual scheme that will hopefully prove useful for understanding and thinking about politics and political thought on a global scale, including from a comparative perspective.

Earlier, I defined what-matters as "a shared vectorial notion that relates to the psychological inclination pointing toward things that matter subjectively from within the sense of self." Let me now unpack this, as what-matters does not simply refer to whatever matters subjectively from the viewpoint of any individual or group of individuals at any given moment in time.

In the preceding discussions, we acknowledged that for a fiction to become real, it must be sustained by collective opinion, where opinion (understood individually) is defined as "a subjective, psychological inclination (and its expression in the form of judgment or belief or view) attributable to a conscious human individual." Likewise, if enough people share the opinion that a certain fiction is worthy of recognition, attention, or respect—that it matters—then that fiction is likely to assume a semblance of reality (at least in the sense discussed in the preceding article). What-matters is cognate with this type of opinion and is thus embedded in the mesh of reality-generating opinions and fictions, which (as we have seen) can be made to cohere through the language of legitimacy.

What is particularly distinctive about what-matters, however, is that it is a

shared vectorial notion, where "shared" implies collective realization or identification, and "vectorial" denotes historicity or path-dependency.

The "shared" aspect of what-matters is easier to explain—at least initially—as it refers to subjective psychological inclinations that are, or can be, shared by multiple individuals in a way that fosters common understanding. It does, however, become more nuanced and complex when combined with the vectorial aspect of what-matters.

What-matters is vectorial in that it encompasses both directionality and span. Directionality provides orientation to opinions, thereby shaping the conditions for future realities—though, when these realities eventually come about over time, they are often marked, to varying degrees, by unintended or unforeseen consequences. This is an inevitable feature of history, given the limits of human intelligence and our control over both human affairs and the broader world. It remains true even in the unlikely scenario where historical development follows a predetermined trajectory.

In addition to directionality, what-matters has a temporal span, in that the transformation of opinions and realities must occur over a given stretch of time—from the past, through the present, and into the future.

Philosophically, of course, this temporal dimension is not as obvious as one might like to assume. Thinkers as diverse as St Augustine and Hobbes have argued that only the present exists, and that the future and the past are non-existent. As St Augustine famously remarked:

> For if there be times past, and times to come; fain would I know where they be: which yet if I be not able to conceive, yet thus much I know, that wheresoever they now be, they are not there future or past, but present. For if there also, future they be, then are they not there yet: if there also they be past, then are they not there still. Wheresoever therefore and whatsoever they be, they are not but as present. Although as for things past, whenever true stories are related, out of the memory are drawn not the things themselves which are past, but such words as being conceived by the images of those things, they, in their passing through our senses, have, as their footsteps, left imprinted in our minds. ⋯ This one thing surely I know; that

> we use very often to premeditate upon our future actions, and that that forethinking is present: but as for the action which we forethink ourselves of, that is not yet in being, because it is yet to come.[1)]

Needless to say, St Augustine's inquiry is not only philosophical but also theological, premised on the indisputable existence of God, who, as the creator of time, transcends it. The notion of eternity, particularly the divinely perceived *nunc stans* (the "eternal now"), forms the unquestionable foundation of his thought.

In contrast, Hobbes, a materialist of sorts, rejects the notion of eternity—especially *nunc stans*—as philosophically absurd; yet, like St Augustine, he privileges the ontological status of the present: "The *Present* onely has a being in Nature; things *Past* have a being in the Memory onely, but things *to come* have no being at all."[2)]

This idea of privileging the present might seem relatively uncontroversial, even commonsensical, to many today. However, it becomes less obvious when one begins to question, as did St Augustine, what exactly is meant by "the present."

> If any instant of time be conceived, which cannot be divided either into

1) *St. Augustine's Confessions*, translated by William Watts, vol. 2, Harvard University Press, 1912, pp. 247–249. St Augustine famously argued for the near intractable nature of time: "What is time then? If nobody asks me, I know: but if I were desirous to explain it to one that should ask me, plainly I know not. Boldly for all this dare I affirm myself to know thus much; that if nothing were passing, there would be no past time: and if nothing were coming, there should be no time to come: and if nothing were, there should now be no present time. Those two times therefore, past and to come, in what sort are they, seeing the past is now no longer, and that to come is not yet? As for the present, should it always be present and never pass into times past, verily it should not be time but eternity. If then time present, to be time, only comes into existence because it passeth into time past; how can we say that also to be, whose cause of being is, that it shall not be: that we cannot, forsooth, affirm that time is, but only because it is tending not to be?" (Ibid., p. 239).

2) Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited by Richard Tuck, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 22. For Hobbes's critique of the notion of *nunc stans*, see Ibid., p. 35, 466–467.

> none, or at most into the smallest particles of moments; that is the only it, which may be called present; which little yet flies with such full speed from the future to the past, as that it is not lengthened out with the very least stay. For lengthened out if it be, then is it divided into the past and the future. As for the present, it takes not up any space.[3)]

It is not uncommon for common sense to dissolve in the face of philosophy, and this is equally true in the face of natural science. If anything, with the advent of modern physics—and especially since the discoveries of general relativity and quantum mechanics—it has become increasingly difficult to take the existence of the present—or, for that matter, time itself—for granted. What time is—whether it is real or illusory, objective or subjective, static or dynamic, and how the past, present, and future should be understood—is still debated among scientists and philosophers. While there are a variety of theories and explanations, no overall consensus has yet emerged, though they generally agree that reality is not as it seems.

But if time is as tenuous as it is made out to be above, how can we even begin to discuss the directionality of what-matters or opinion, and how they transform over time?

Again, my approach avoids delving into the philosophical or scientific rabbit hole of trying to unveil the true nature of reality—whether temporal or spatial, material or immaterial—and instead focuses on the sense of reality perceived through the sense of self. In other words, rather than attempting to explain what time *is*, I focus on the commonly held *opinion* of time and build my argument concerning what-matters based on that. As I hope to demonstrate, this approach is more conducive to understanding the nature of social and political reality.

The starting point, therefore, is to affirm that most people most of the time believe that the present exists, the past has existed, and the future is yet to come. While this may generally be true for many at various times and in different places, the ways in which the past, present, and future are conceived and related

3) *St. Augustine's Confessions*, vol. 2, pp. 243–245.

have led to varying forms of social and political realities, as opinion and fiction conspire to create them. For instance, in a society where people believe they live in the present but prioritize the afterlife, the immortal soul, eternity, or *nunc stans*, that society will be characterized by fictions (i.e., institutions, morality, social norms, traditions, rituals, etc.) compatible with such beliefs. This kind of causal relationship also applies to societies whose opinions recognize the temporal fluidity between the past, present, and future—where, for instance, it is considered possible for individuals or their souls to travel back and forth through time, converse with the dead, and occasionally have premonitions of the future.

Despite this diversity, however, most people most of the time agree (especially today) that the present exists as a temporal milieu where people live, that the past once existed in a similar way and is accessible through memory, and that the future is a form of anticipation in the present. From this perspective, the past is already fixed and unchangeable, whereas the future is open, as the latter is affected (at least partly) by how we think and act here and now. The sense that one can remember the past but not the future may attest to this perception or opinion of time.

Given the above, it seems reasonable to argue that, insofar as social and political reality is concerned, the past is more accessible than the future. However, if the past only manifests itself as memory in the present, then it is not entirely clear how accurate or complete the representation or reconstruction of the past can be. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that various competing paradigms exist for comprehending history.

Some historians, especially those with strong faith in the positivist or empirical approach, maintain that by observing and analyzing available data, texts, material objects, and orally transmitted accounts—all considered to contain information or memories of the past—one can reconstruct historical events and ideas with a reliable degree of accuracy, thereby approaching an objective understanding of the past.

The contrasting position argues that it is all subjective and that any form of historical discourse is almost indistinguishable from ideology, or even imaginative composition. As Roland Barthes once remarked: “By its very

structure and without there being any need to appeal to the substance of the content, historical discourse is essentially an ideological elaboration or, to be more specific, an *imaginary* elaboration."[4)]

The above represent polar opposites (though somewhat caricatured for the sake of the argument) and most historians, if pressed, would, I think, admit to falling somewhere in between—claiming their historical reconstruction to be neither entirely objective nor subjective. However, the point I wish to convey is that, regardless of where one falls on the spectrum, no one (or hardly anyone) is likely to deny that the past once existed as the present. If this is true, then the differences become a matter of degree, and recovering the past becomes an exercise in epistemology rather than ontology, though the disagreements over the efficacy of different methods and interpretations will likely continue.[5)]

This article is primarily concerned with how social and political reality is created, maintained, and transformed over time. Therefore, instead of engaging with historiographical controversies of the kind mentioned above, I will focus on how opinion (the building block of social and political reality) at various points in time attains directionality and how this relates to the notion of what-matters.

If we agree that nothing emerges from nothing, then we must also agree that opinion and its directionality in the present must have some causal relationship with those of the immediate past and future. What-matters, I wish to maintain, is one of the important drivers that provides directionality to opinion from the past to the present, and from the present to the future. And as what-matters is vectorial in the sense described above, I wish to explain how this notion is inseparable from historicity, more precisely, path-dependency.

Path-dependency is a concept that gained significance in economics in the 1980s to illustrate how past events, choices, and processes can influence future results, even when more efficient or better options are available.[6)] Proponents of this concept partly intended it as a critique of ahistorical approaches in economics, offering an explanation of how technological systems, institutions, and economic behavior are often shaped by historical factors, particularly the

4) Roland Barthes, "The Discourse of History," in *The Rustle of Language*, translated by Richard Howard, University of California Press, 1989, p. 138.

paths taken in the past.

Path-dependency soon gained influence in other fields, such as political science and sociology, leading to a wide array of theories and explanations of various phenomena. For example, Charles Tilly argued that "path dependency prevails in political processes, such that events occurring at one stage in a sequence constrain the range of events that is possible at later stages."[7] Despite the growing number of analyses based on path-dependency and their

5) Needless to say, one should not trivialize these controversies over methodology, as they can lead to fundamentally different interpretations of history, with significant implications for both the present and the future. It is also important, I believe, to recognize that there can be more than one valid methodology, as different themes, fields, and materials may require different approaches. Some controversies are, it seems to me, characterized by critiques that overlook this point. For instance, the historian of political thought Quentin Skinner was once criticized for what some saw as adopting an old-fashioned positivist approach—believing that the authorial intentionality (or illocutionary force) of past thinkers can be recovered by resorting to what is sometimes referred to as the Cambridge School methodology. Skinner's somewhat vitriolic response against his critics (represented in the figure of Jacque Derrida, though Derrida himself is not directly involved in the controversy) illustrates how one methodology—even with a set of legitimate claims in its own field of study and distinctive aims—cannot simply be transplanted to another. "I protest only at the assumption that it follows from this that the kinds of intentions I have been discussing are, as Derrida claims, in all cases 'in principle inaccessible.' If this were true, the effect would not only be to cut off the type of hermeneutics in which I am interested; it would also be to render meaningless a whole range of practices extending from the conducting of orchestras to the assessment of criminal responsibility. Such scepticism strikes me as unhelpfully hyperbolical, especially when we reflect that even animals are sometimes capable of recovering the intentions with which people act. Dogs often disclose by their responses that they are able to distinguish between an accidental and a deliberate kick. Derrida ought surely to be able to rise to at least the same interpretive heights" (Quentin Skinner, *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, edited by James Tully, Polity Press, 1988, p. 281).

6) Most prominent are the studies undertaken by economists like Paul David and Brian Arthur. They refer to the QWERTY keyboard layout and, in the case of Arthur, other technological developments as case studies to explain how path-dependency can affect outcomes while defying optimal efficiency. See Paul David, "Clio and the Economics of QWERTY," *The American Economic Review*, vol. 75, no. 2, 1985, pp. 332–337; Brian Arthur, "Competing Technologies, Increasing Returns, and Lock-In by Historical Events," *The Economic Journal*, vol. 99, no. 394, 1989, pp. 116–131.

effectiveness as counterarguments to ahistorical approaches, however, some commentators have begun to question whether there is a common basis at all. What is more, what does path-dependency add to the truism that history matters?

James Mahoney and Daniel Schensul, having reviewed a variety of literature on path-dependency, state the following regarding its commonality:

> These scholars are united around the belief that history matters in more profound ways than acknowledged in most social science work. All of them assert that particular events in the past can have crucial effects in the future, and that these events may be located in the quite distant past. Indeed, one of the most distinctive features of path dependence is the idea that the most important effects of a given event may be "temporally lagged"—i.e. not initially felt but clearly visible at a later point in time. Furthermore, scholars of path dependence tend to agree that many leading methodologies—such as mainstream statistical methods and rational choice analysis—can deflect attention away from particular historical events and thereby mischaracterize the causes of important outcomes. In these ways, there is some consensus among scholars who use the concept of path dependence.[8)]

Having made this remark, Mahoney and Schensul go on to explain that there are disagreements about the role of history, which can be said to revolve around the following six features: (1) the past affects the future, (2) initial conditions are causally important, (3) contingent events are causally important, (4) historical lock-in occurs, (5) a self-reproducing sequence occurs, and (6) a reactive sequence occurs.

These insights are, I think, both interesting and helpful. However, rather than aligning my position with one or more of these features, I aim to present a

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7) Charles Tilly, "Why and How History Matters," in Robert Goodin and Charles Tilly (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 417–437 (p. 421).

8) James Mahoney and Daniel Schensul, "Historical Context and Path Dependence," in *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, pp. 454–471 (p. 457).

notion of path-dependency that builds on my previous discussions of opinion and fiction, and leads toward what-matters. In so doing, I distinguish four interconnected levels of path-dependency: personal, communal, intercommunal, and global.

Let me begin on the personal level. Each and every human being is born into the world not by their own making, and yet, once self-awareness develops, one begins to make choices that affect the course of their life. Needless to say, there are limits to what can be chosen, and choices often do not produce the expected or hoped-for outcomes. Reality often defies one's intentions, expectations, or desires, revealing that control is always partial—if at all—and outcomes are never guaranteed.

That being so, it seems undeniable that the choices individuals make, as well as the events that happen to them and around them, shape their personality or character. In other words, the paths individuals take influence, to varying degrees, their sense of who they are and what seems real or realistic in terms of their individual standing, as well as their personal and societal projects.

If path-dependency at the personal level is understood as described above, then its validity seems almost self-evident. Indeed, the concept of path-dependency is pervasive in many psychological theories—particularly in developmental and clinical psychology—even though the term itself is rarely used. This may be because psychology, as a discipline, is deeply rooted in empirical findings and is therefore hardly an ahistorical field. Many psychological theories are shaped by experimental data and contextual influences, even if these are not always explicitly foregrounded.

Of course, when we expand the realm of inquiry to include areas such as ethics and moral philosophy, we begin to encounter theories and explanations that are more clearly detached from the particularities of time, space, and experience. Utilitarianism takes various forms, but Bentham's classic formulation is a case in point.

> Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of

> right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it. In words a man may pretend to abjure their empire: but in reality he will remain subject to it all the while.[9)]

This, on the one hand, is a statement about the psychological inclinations of individual human beings in general—a fact about human nature, as it were. But according to Bentham, this is also inextricably linked to a normative claim—that is, to "the standard of right and wrong." This normative dimension, in turn, is itself bound to a collective criterion: "the greatest happiness of the greatest number."[10)]

Looking solely at these constituents, one might raise concerns about the is-ought problem, as well as question the validity of the claim that individuals are invariably disposed to pursue pleasure and avoid pain. How can one move from this psychological fact—assuming it is true—that humans are governed by pleasure and pain, to a normative claim about what is right and wrong based on that fact, not to mention the leap from the individual to the collective?[11)] Is it really true that humans are governed solely by pleasure and pain? Are pleasure and pain themselves not transformative and context-dependent?

Bentham scholars might argue that it would be wrong to reduce his utilitarianism simply by examining his earliest works—that it is necessary to consider the ideas developed in his later works.[12)] Additionally, commentators

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9) Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, edited by J.H. Burns and H.L.A. Hart, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 11.

10) Bentham's greatest happiness principle pervades his *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. In an earlier work, he stated explicitly that: "it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong" (*A Fragment on Government*, edited by J.H. Burns and H.L.A. Hart, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 3). As is well known, Bentham was not the first to come up with the phrase "the greatest happiness of the greatest number." It appeared previously in the works of Francis Hutcheson, Claude Adrian Helvétius, and Cesare Beccaria. See Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer, *Utilitarianism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 2–3.

sympathetic to utilitarianism might contend that there are other versions of the theory that differ significantly from Bentham's and are less susceptible to such criticisms. (Though Bentham scholars might retort that Bentham is not advocating a crude form of act-utilitarianism.[13])

As for the second point, philosophers like Bernard Williams challenge utilitarianism—not necessarily Bentham's version specifically, since Williams treats "utilitarianism as a system of personal morality rather than as a system of social or political decision-making"[14]— on the grounds that it rests on a flawed view of moral agency. According to Williams, utilitarianism fails to acknowledge essential aspects of human experience, such as commitment and moral identity, which are central to an individual's integrity. Human beings do not, and arguably should not, simply act in accordance with utilitarian

11） The "is-ought problem" refers to a philosophical distinction—and the logical challenge it presents—between descriptive statements (*is*) and prescriptive statements (*ought*). Its origin is commonly attributed to David Hume (hence the expression "Hume's guillotine"), although Hume himself did not fully elaborate the idea as a formal argument. The problem was later discussed extensively—especially in the twentieth century—within moral, legal, and political philosophy. In a related critique, G.E. Moore accused utilitarianism—particularly J.S. Mill's version, rather than Bentham's—of committing a similar logical error, which he termed the "naturalistic fallacy."

12） See Frederick Rosen, *Jeremy Bentham and Representative Democracy: A Study of the Constitutional Code*, Oxford University Press, 1983; Frederick Rosen, "Introduction" in Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, pp. xxxi-lxix. As is evident from the works above, despite Bentham's seemingly ahistorical utilitarianism, he was well aware of contextual constraints and was keen to devise various kinds of laws and policies that he believed were realistic and realizable within the given contexts.

13） See, for instance, Paul Joseph Kelly, *Utilitarianism and Distributive Justice: Jeremy Bentham and the Civil Law*, Oxford University Press, 1990. Moreover, as Ross Harrison in the "Introduction" to Bentham's *A Fragment on Government* (edited by J.H. Burns and H.L.A. Hart, Cambridge University Press, 1988) states, Bentham is not developing a personal ethics but that his central concern was with "what the law should be, that is with what the government should do" (p. xvii). And it goes without saying that despite the seemingly timeless nature of the greatest happiness principle, Bentham was hugely aware of contextual factors and constraints in trying to devise laws and policies that would achieve effective reforms.

principles, whether those principles are framed as act-utilitarianism or rule-utilitarianism.[15)]

Returning to my discussion of path-dependency and what-matters, I think it is fair to say that both utilitarian and anti- or non-utilitarian positions would likely agree that, regardless of the specific drivers behind personal cognitive processes—whether pain, pleasure, happiness, commitment, moral identity, or something else—individuals are, to a greater or lesser degree, predisposed to think and act in certain ways based on what they subjectively perceive to matter to them. At the same time, each individual's understanding of what matters is, more often than not, what gives directionality to their opinions—opinion being defined (as previously noted) as "a subjective, psychological inclination (and its expression in the form of judgment, belief, or view) attributable to a conscious human individual." Put slightly differently—and more simply—individuals tend to form and hold on to opinions based on what matters to them (though not exclusively), and these opinions have directionality because they are guided by those perceptions of what matters. Moreover, it is hardly a stretch to suggest that this, too, is path-dependent—much like personality and character, which are shaped over time by a unique sequence of experiences, relationships, and internalized values.

This is what I mean by path-dependency at the personal level: each individual's opinions are significantly shaped by their own unique historical trajectory and are thus context-dependent in a specific way. However, while this

14) Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, Cambridge University Press, 1973, pp. 75–150 (p. 77). Williams does, however, briefly discuss certain political aspects, since he believes the two levels cannot be entirely separated: "The fathers of utilitarianism thought of it principally as a system of social and political decision, as offering a criterion and basis of judgment for legislators and administrators. This is recognizably a different matter from utilitarianism as a system of personal morality, but it is hard for a number of important reasons to keep the two things ultimately apart, and to stop the spirit of utilitarianism, firmly established in one, from moving into the other" (Ibid., pp. 135–136).

15) As for act-utilitarianism and rule-utilitarianism, see J.J.C. Smart, in *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, pp. 1–74, esp. pp. 9–12; Ben Eggleston and Dale E. Miller, *The Cambridge Companion to Utilitarianism*, Cambridge University Press, 2014, esp. chapters 6 and 7.

is closely tied to what matters to each person, it is not yet the notion of what-matters that I am proposing. The term what-matters, as I use it, refers to a *shared* notion. To understand what what-matters is, we must shift from the personal to the communal level and examine how path-dependency operates in shared spaces of meaning—particularly in relation to my ideas about opinion and fiction, and the ways in which these elements coalesce.

To state the obvious, one person's opinion cannot be directly shared with another in the sense of having exactly the same subjective psychological inclination. An opinion that one individual holds is opaque to another, and sometimes even unclear to the individual themselves. This is at least the case in the present state of science, however groundbreaking and rapidly evolving the field of neuroscience and BMI-mediated mind-reading technology may be.[16)]

If, therefore, we are to make sense of having a shared opinion, we must acknowledge (as mentioned in the previous article) that an opinion is typically an opinion *about* something—and that this *something* is, by and large, fiction.[17)] In other words, fiction becomes the hub or medium around which opinions coalesce, lending both individual opinions and fiction a semblance of unity and sharedness —though this sharedness may take various forms, such as approval, disapproval, acknowledgement, rejection, or indifference. Of course, it is entirely possible that individual opinions actually differ from one another—one could even say that no two opinions are ever exactly the same (though there is no way to know this, since no one can enter another person's brain or mind). And yet, when these differing opinions are directed toward the same fiction in a similar manner of judgment, belief, or view, it appears—from the outside (which, in effect, means from each person's perspective)—as if the opinion is shared.

The example I offered in the previous article—justice—serves to illustrate the kind of *something* an opinion can be *about*—a *something* that is, for the most

16） For the issue of mind-reading technology and its potential impact on politics, see Ken Tsutsumibayashi, "Anticipated Technological Breakthroughs and Their Possible Impact on Democratic Legitimacy: ELSI and the Political Implications of Neuroscience," *Hogaku Kenkyu* (*Journal of Law, Politics and Sociology*), 96-6, 2023, pp. 71-100.

17） I say "more often than not" because that "something" is almost invariably perceived through language. Both this "something" and language are fictions.

part, constituted through fiction. The example of "justice" may, however, overcomplicate the issue at this point, as justice-as-fiction could be understood either as a specific notion or as a system of thought. It is one thing for individuals' respective senses or opinions of justice to align with a single notion of justice; it is quite another for them to converge around a system of justice composed of multiple, distinct, and interrelated notions. I will address this issue later, but for now, I will focus on the broad mechanism by which it becomes possible to talk about shared opinion, and how directionality could come into play.

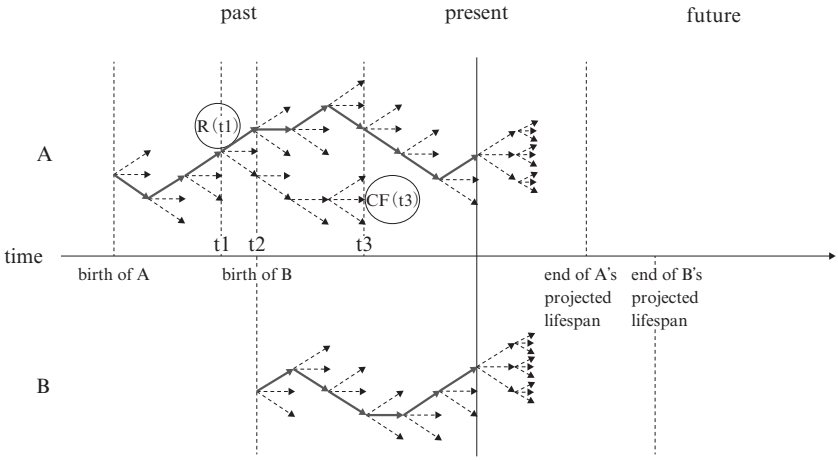
The shared opinion among a group of individuals at any given time is causally related to the shared opinion of both the immediate past and future. Of course, if you look further back into the past or further ahead into the future, the same individuals may not share either the same opinion or the same fiction. As mentioned briefly in the previous article, the opinion of the many may shift from one fiction to another. It is also possible that the same group of individuals may fragment into smaller groups, with each group's opinions coalescing around different fictions.

The point I wish to emphasize here is that this process, at the communal level, is not only path-dependent, but that its path-dependency operates through a more complex mechanism than what is observed at the individual level.

Let me try to explain the differences using simple figures.

Figure 1 illustrates path-dependency at the individual level. Two individuals, A and B, have different lifespans, and their lives follow distinct trajectories shaped by the unique experiences and choices each has made under varying circumstances. At each point in time, A and B are able to make decisions—while multiple options are typically available, nothing is predetermined, even if the options may appear limited or unenticing. Moreover, what they choose and how they go about choosing it are usually guided by what matters to them, and their choices—along with the resulting consequences and subsequent events they experience over time—contribute to shaping both who they are and what their opinions become. Needless to say, people often make mistakes and come to regret their decisions. Additionally, it is not unusual for people to imagine counterfactual situations: *If only I had done, or had not done,*

Figure 1

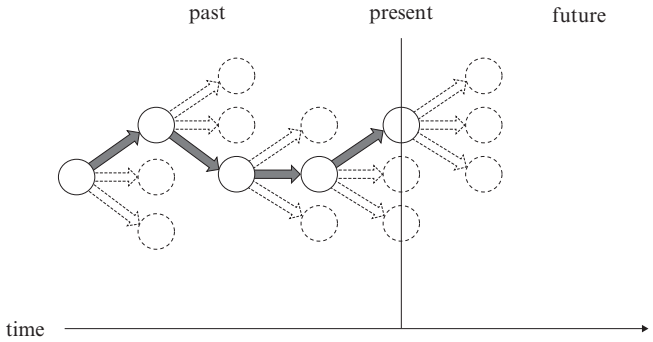


this, that, or the other. However, while one might imagine how life could have turned out quite differently had one made a particular choice in the distant past, this remains pure speculation from the current vantage point. As is the case with A in Figure 1, it is impossible to reconstruct with any degree of accuracy or plausibility how a different decision at R(t1) might have led to CF(t3). What was a real choice at R(t1) is now simply an unattainable counterfactual at CF(t3), given that A did not take the path that would have led there. Moreover, by t3, A's personality and opinions have transformed to such an extent that not only is CF(t3) no longer grounded in any real-world possibility, but it is also likely beyond the realm of A's imagination. Whatever it is that A is imagining is not CF(t3), but something conjured in the present with knowledge available *in* the present.

Figure 2 provides a visual representation of how path-dependency operates at the communal level.

Notwithstanding the apparent structural similarity—namely, that there were always multiple possibilities in the past, but what ultimately transpired shaped a path that limits present imagination and conditions, and consequently, future alternatives—important differences render path-dependency at the

Figure 2



communal level considerably more complex to comprehend. To begin with the obvious: any community comprises multiple individuals, and it is not always clear who, if anyone, is steering its course. While each individual makes choices at any given time, whose choices are most determinant in shaping the collective trajectory? The notion that shared opinion possesses directionality only adds to this complexity. There is also the question of memory. For an individual, memory is internal and physiological; for a community, it is selective and mediated through texts, institutions, culture, historical narratives, and practices. Nor can mortality be addressed in the same way. Whereas individual human beings—like A and B—have finite lifespans and their personal memories die with them, a community can outlive its members, replacing the old with the new and preserving collective memory through the aforementioned media, which are, in effect, fictions as defined in this article. These fictions, in turn, enable living individuals to internalize certain aspects of them, thereby influencing their opinions. Further complicating matters is the fact that collective memory is sometimes fabricated or distorted—deliberately or inadvertently—to the point that it bears little resemblance to what actually occurred.[18)]

All of this shows that opinion widely shared by a community is not only

18) Of course, this can happen at the personal level as well, but, as we shall see, it is of a different order.

complex and multidimensional in structure; it is also mediated by a variety of interconnected fictions that manifest in different forms to various members and groups, while simultaneously—if not always consistently—appearing as relatively coherent and unified, with a sense of direction. (Let us recall that the opinions of various actors do not carry equal weight. Yet, as in an autocratic society where the autocrat is only attentive to the opinions of those immediately surrounding them, the structure of rule as a whole can remain durably functional if the majority of people support or identify with the system—an overarching fiction—from their own perspective, however limited or partial in scope.)

How this is achieved varies from community to community, and the specific contents depend largely on the historical path each community has taken. Each member or group within a community may experience events and incidents differently. However, when confronted with significant, shared experiences over time—such as wars, conquests, revolutions, unprecedented prosperity, extreme poverty, dramatic changes in societal structures, or technological innovations that fundamentally alter lifestyles—these experiences can shape the overall direction of shared opinion and collective imagination, thereby influencing the course of history. This may manifest in the form of culture, tradition, collective euphoria or trauma, and so on. Of course, even these experiences will vary among individuals and groups. Nevertheless, it still makes sense to speak of a collective sense of identity or experience to which all can, in some way, relate.[19)]

What-matters, then, is a shared and vectorial notion that both amalgamates and guides the widely diverse opinions of individuals—mediated through various interconnected fictions, as well as an overarching fiction—while offering the curious appearance of coherence and direction to the community.

But why coin a new term instead of simply using “culture,” “tradition,” “public interest,” “general will,” “public opinion,” or any other familiar term—even “what matters” without the hyphen? One might pose this question, especially if one admits that many of these terms often capture—or are underpinned by—what matters to many individuals and groups within—or as—

19) Of course, serious divisions may arise within a community, leading to irreconcilable opinions. This issue will be addressed later.

a community at various points in time.

My reason, put simply, is to define what-matters as a notion that privileges the present while remaining continuously grounded in a path-dependent past. The familiar terms mentioned above do not always convey this distinction.

Terms such as "culture" and "tradition" can be seen (though not always) as over-privileging the past—to the extent that the present becomes constrained by, or even subordinated to, ossified or outdated norms and rules that may seem almost incompatible with current conditions and prevailing opinions.

In contrast, terms like "public interest," "general will," and "public opinion" can over-privilege the present, potentially justifying decisions of the moment at the expense of historical continuity and long-term interests. For example, it is not uncommon for election results or purported majority will to be weaponized in support of short-term—or even factional—interests of the winning side. In extreme cases, the language of democracy can be employed to undermine democracy itself—the problem of presentism (more of which later).

What-matters is, therefore, intended as a notion that avoids over-privileging either the past or the present; instead, it seeks to balance and connect memory or knowledge of the past with present opinion—while remaining cognizant that such cognitive engagement always occurs in the present. Moreover, the notion is inseparable from "the psychological inclination pointing toward things that matter subjectively from within the sense of self," an inclination always experienced in the present, within each individual, even when guided or shaped by shared opinion and experience. Conversely, shared opinion and its directionality are the amalgamated effect of these individual psychological inclinations, which, in a complex way, constitute what-matters.

Given this understanding of what-matters as something inextricably linked to path-dependency at the communal level, how can it be identified? To answer this question, it is first necessary to clarify how path-dependency can be traced within communities and how historical experience has shaped both opinion and fiction over time, leading up to the present.

In pursuing this line of argument, the first point to note is that—just as at the individual level—path-dependency at the communal level limits the range of both what is possible and what is imaginable in the present. While it is

reasonable to assume that, at any given point in the past, there were alternative choices and future possibilities beyond the one that ultimately transpired, the selection of a particular path inevitably constrains the range of options available in subsequent periods. Thus, not only is it impossible for a community to return to the past and take the path not taken, but it is also impossible even to imagine how history might have unfolded had that counterfactual path been taken—except through memory, opinion, and fiction (including historical artefacts) factually passed down to the present, and the imaginative capacities rooted in them. Even in its most fantastical or outlandish manifestation, the scope of our imagination is ultimately a product of who we are—and what we know, or think we know—in the present.

However, this is not to dismiss historical studies that emphasize the value of counterfactual analysis. Moreover, however implausible or fantastical it may be, if a counterfactual narrative comes to inform a shared opinion, then by virtue of the fact that it does, it can have real-world consequences. Given the recent surge in counterfactual studies, as well as the controversies surrounding them, I will briefly touch on this topic to demonstrate how it relates to my own argument.

Defenders of counterfactual history might rightly point out that even historians committed to empirically grounded accounts often engage in counterfactual reasoning. Indeed, it can be said that "historians have been doing it [counterfactual inference] for at least two thousand years,"[20] as countless examples demonstrate.

To mention just a few, Tacitus reflected on the world in which Germanicus lived, imagining how the subsequent course of history might have changed had he survived to ascend to the imperial throne.[21] Livy, another Roman historian, entertained a hypothetical scenario in which Alexander the Great, after conquering Asia, turned his attention westward to Italy.[22] In modern times, Edward Gibbon famously—and playfully—offered the following speculation

20） Philip E. Tetlock and Aaron Belkin (eds), *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics: Logical, Methodological, and Psychological Perspectives*, Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 3.

about what might have happened had Charles Martel not emerged victorious against the Saracens in 732:

> A victorious line of march had been prolonged above a thousand miles from the rock of Gibraltar to the banks of the Loire; the repetition of an equal space would have carried the Saracens to the confines of Poland and the Highlands of Scotland; the Rhine is not more impassable than the Nile or Euphrates, and the Arabian fleet might have sailed without a naval combat into the mouth of the Thames. Perhaps the interpretation of the Koran would now be taught in the schools of Oxford, and her pulpits might demonstrate to a circumcised people the sanctity and truth of the revelation of Mahomet.[23)]

What is noteworthy is that, since the 1990s, there has been a renewed interest among some historians in counterfactual historical analysis, with extensive debate about its efficacy and how it should be conducted to remain a serious part of historical studies rather than devolve into a mere "parlor game"

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21) This example follows the above quotation. Incidentally, Victor Davis Hanson posits that the ancient Greek historian Herodotus was the first to present "a counterfactual thought experiment in recorded history—to prove that the Athenians alone had kept Greece free at Salamis" ("A Stillborn West? Themistocles at Salamis, 480 BC," in Philip E. Tetlock, Richard Ned Lebow, Geoffrey Parker [eds], *Unmaking the West: "What-If?" Scenarios That Rewrite World History*, The University of Michigan Press, 2006, pp. 47–89, [p. 48]).

22) Titus Livius, *The History of Rome*, translated by Rev. Canon Roberts, J.M. Dent, 1912, vol. 2, p. 180: "Nothing can be thought to be further from my aim since I commenced this task than to digress more than is necessary from the order of the narrative or by embellishing my work with a variety of topics to afford pleasant resting-places, as it were, for my readers and mental relaxation for myself. The mention, however, of so great a king and commander induces me to lay before my readers some reflections which I have often made when I have proposed to myself the question, 'What would have been the results for Rome if she had been engaged in war with Alexander?'" (Book 9, chapter 17).

23) Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Methuen & Co., edited. by J.B. Bury, fourth edition, 1911–1920, vol. 6, p. 15.

(E.H. Carr).[24)]

One of the proponents of counterfactual history, Niall Ferguson, edited a book entitled *Virtual History*, featuring contributors who discuss various counterfactual scenarios.[25)] The chapter subtitles indicate the wide range of topics covered in the book, such as: "What if Charles I had avoided the Civil War?," "What if there had been no American Revolution?," "What if Home Rule had been enacted in 1912?," "What if Britain had 'stood aside' in August 1914?," "What if Germany had invaded Britain in May 1940?," "What if Nazi Germany had defeated the Soviet Union?," "What if the Cold War had been avoided?," "What if John F. Kennedy had lived?," and "What if Communism had not collapsed?"

Ferguson, his co-authors, and many others who defend counterfactual history today are fully aware that, when divorced from causally or logically plausible inferences grounded in historical facts and surrounding circumstances, such narratives can easily degenerate into mere parlor games or pure fantasy.

It is, for instance, unlikely that any of them would endorse the kind of counterfactual speculation presented by Louis Geoffroy, a nineteenth-century French writer and author of *Napoleon and the Conquest of the World*. In this work, Geoffroy imagines an alternate history in which Napoleon I, after defeating the Russians, British, and Prussians, goes on to conquer the rest of continental Europe, then Egypt, the Middle East, Central Asia, India, China, and Japan. He ultimately establishes dominion over Australia, Africa, and the Americas, finally becoming the "Ruler of the World."[26)] In Geoffroy's vision, Napoleon establishes a universal monarchy marked by scientific advancement and perpetual peace, with Christianity as the sole religion. However, this imagined outcome—divorced from the political, logistical, and cultural realities of the early nineteenth century—reads more like a utopian fantasy than a

24) E.H. Carr, *What Is History?*, Pelican Books, 1964, p. 97.

25) Niall Ferguson (ed.), *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*, Picador, 1997. In the "Introduction," Ferguson refers to Gibbon as a serious historian who "occasionally allowed himself to write in an explicitly counterfactual way," and he cites the quotation above, though he qualifies this particular passage as "a Gibbonian joke at the expense of the university which had taught him so little" (p. 8).

plausible historical alternative.

Richard Evans, who is—if anything—a critic of counterfactual history, states that "Geoffroy's narrative was clearly wishful thinking on the grandest possible scale."[27] Having surveyed similarly elaborate "what if?" speculations that emerged in the nineteenth century, he relegates them to the realm of entertainment. From the 1990s onward, however, Evans acknowledges that counterfactual history has not only become fashionable among Anglophone historians but has also taken on a more serious and methodologically grounded character, citing Ferguson's contributions along with those of many others.[28]

The pros and cons of the counterfactual approach suggested by historians are many and varied. For the sake of simplicity, I will focus on a couple of key points of contention between Ferguson and Evans, as a way to clarify my

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26) Louis Geoffroy, *Napoléon et la Conquête du Monde*, H.-L. Delloye, 1836. While defending counterfactual history, Philip Tetlock and Geoffrey Parker caution that "carelessly practiced, counterfactual history quickly becomes a branch of social science fiction" (Philip E. Tetlock and Geoffrey Parker, "Counterfactual Thought Experiments: Why We Can't Live Without Them & How We Must Learn to Live With Them," in Philip E. Tetlock et al. [eds], *Unmaking the West*, pp. 14–44, p. 30, p. 41 fn. 35.). To illustrate this point, they cite the following works. John Collings Squire (ed.), *If It Had Happened Otherwise: Lapses into Imaginary History*, Longmans, 1932; John M. Merriman (ed.), *For Want of a Horse: Choice and Chance in History*, Penguin, 1985; Gregory Benford and Martin H. Greenberg (eds), *Hitler Victorious: Eleven Stories of the German Victory in World War II*, Taylor and Francis, 1986; Robert Harris, *Fatherland*, Random House, 1992.

27) Richard J. Evans, *Altered Pasts: Counterfactuals in History*, Brandeis University Press, 2013, p. 6. He also provides a brief summary and examination of Geoffroy's counterfactual narrative (pp. 3–6) before offering his verdict, characterizing it as a form of "wishful thinking"—which, incidentally, is the title of his first chapter. In a similar vein, Evans examines Charles Renouvier's articles, later compiled into the book *Uchronie*, published several decades after Geoffroy's (pp. 6–8). [*Uchronie (L'Utopie dans l'histoire): Esquisse historique apocryphe du développement de la civilisation européenne tel qu'il n'a pas été, tel qu'il aurait pu être*, Bureau de la critique philosophique, 1876.] A neologism coined to mean "a utopia of past time," *uchronie* is a history "not as it was, but as it could have been," and is equally dynamic and fantastical, rewriting the course of Western civilization and world history. To this, Evans adds: "Renouvier would have been more honest had he said *should* have been" (p. 6). Ferguson also refers to Renouvier's *Uchronie* in his introduction to *Virtual History* (pp. 8–9).

argument about path-dependency and what-matters.

Ferguson argues that many historical studies that focus solely on what actually happened tend to become deterministic in their descriptions and assumptions. Thus, while remaining aware of the risk that counterfactual narratives can slip into fantasy, he emphasizes the importance of considering plausible alternatives—those that can reasonably be assumed to have been possible, even though they did not occur. Hence his formulation: "We should consider as plausible or probable *only those alternatives which we can show on the basis of contemporary evidence that contemporaries actually considered*."[29)]

28） Evans mentions the following (Evans, op. cit., pp. 27–28): Dennis Showalter and Harold Deutsch (eds), *If the Allies Had Fallen: Sixty Alternate Scenarios of World War II*, Skyhorse, 2010; Robert Cowley (ed), *What If?: The World's Foremost Historians Imagine What Might Have Been*, Penguin, 2000; Robert Cowley (ed), *What If?: Eminent Historians Imagine What Might Have Been*, Macmillan, 2014; Robert Cowley (ed), *What Ifs? of American History: Eminent Historians Imagine What Might Have Been*, Penguin, 2004; Andrew Roberts (ed), *What Might Have Been: Imaginary History from Twelve Leading Historians*, Orion, 2004; Philip Tetlock, Richard Ned Lebow and Geoffrey Parker (eds), *Unmaking the West: "What-If?" Scenarios That Rewrite World History*, University of Michigan Press, 2006; Duncan Brack (ed.), *President Gore and Other Things That Never Happened*, Politicos, 2007; Duncan Brack and Iain Dale (eds), *Prime Minister Portillo and Other Things That Never Happened*, Politicos, 2003; Duncan Brack and Iain Dale (eds), *Prime Minister Boris and Other Things That Never Happened*, Biteback, 2012; Peter Tsouras, *Disaster at D-Day: The Germans Defeat the Allie*s, Greenhill, 1994; Peter Tsouras, *Disaster at Stalingrad: An Alternate History*, Frontline, 2013; Peter Tsouras (ed.), *Third Reich Victorious: An Alternate Histories of World War II*, Greenhill, 2002 [along with numerous other works by Tsouras on the Cold War, the War in the East, the Battle of Gettysburg, the Battle of Waterloo, etc.]; Jeremy Black, *What If?: Counterfactualism and the Problem of History*, Social Affairs Unity, 2008. As for works published in the 1990s, I should also include Geoffrey Hawthorn's pioneering study *Plausible Worlds* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), which Evans later references in *Altered Pasts* (p. 108). In addition, Tetlock and Belkin's edited volume, *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics*—previously cited in the footnote—warrants mention. Interestingly, Evans also offers an explanation for the recent resurgence of interest in counterfactual history. See Evans, *Altered Pasts*, pp. 28–30. Ultimately, however, he concludes that many such narratives are, to varying degrees, grounded in wishful thinking: "Wishful thinking is everywhere in the world of historical counterfactual" (Ibid., p. 63).

29） *Virtual History*, p. 86.

Evans, for his part, begins by stating that "this [formulation] seems a perfectly reasonable way of proceeding," but nonetheless takes issue with it for reducing "the role of contingency to a negligible quantity because only carefully considered and debated conditions could be taken into account."[30] On this particular point, however, it should be noted that Ferguson arguably emerges unscathed, as his formulation was qualified in the following way: "To understand how it actually was, we therefore need to understand *how it actually wasn't*—but how, to contemporaries, it might have been. This is even more true when the actual outcome is one which no one expected—which was not actually thought about until it happened."[31]

A more substantial challenge confronting Ferguson—and indeed many other advocates of counterfactual history—lies in the inherent difficulty of constructing plausible long-term alternative narratives. As Evans contends, "long-range counterfactual speculations are unconvincing and unnecessary for the historian because they elide too many links in the proposed causative chain after the initial altered event."[32] In support of this argument, Evans offers numerous examples that illustrate the unviability of such extended counterfactual scenarios. While I acknowledge my limited expertise in fully assessing these specific critiques, their broader implications resonate with my own theoretical framework regarding path-dependency. Specifically, although a multitude of potential futures might have existed at any given historical

30) *Altered Pasts*, p. 46.

31) *Virtual History*, p. 87.

32) *Altered Pasts*, p. 123. Or, as he states elsewhere in the same book: "Altering one part of the kaleidoscope of history shakes up all the others in ways that are quite unpredictable" (p. 101). See also Ibid., pp. 57–62, where Evans cites numerous other commentators who share his perspective. The following is one such example (p. 59): "As [Allan] Megill notes [in *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice*, University of Chicago Press, 2007, p. 152], 'contingency cuts two ways,' for if we have contingency at the outset of a counterfactual speculation, then we must also have it in the early middle, the middle, and the late stages, indeed all the way through. Thus 'contingency is not a train one can get on or off at will,' so that counterfactual history in this sense 'cannot follow any definable course at all. More precisely, it can follow a definable course only until the next contingency arises'."

juncture, the task of envisaging how events could have plausibly unfolded along an alternative trajectory is fundamentally misleading due to an unavoidable constraint. This constraint arises because such reconstructions are invariably mediated through the interpretive filters of memory, interpretation, and fiction—all of which, together with the faculty of imagination, are profoundly influenced by the present, itself the outcome of the path actually taken. Thus, any attempt to imagine an alternative past is necessarily conditioned by the contingencies and limitations of the current moment, underscoring the epistemological challenges inherent in long-term counterfactual history.

Of course, this is not to deny the efficacy of imagining short-term counterfactuals. It remains always possible to assume that events might have turned out differently in the immediate period of a given historical juncture. One might argue that such considerations pertain more to contingency than to rigorous counterfactual analysis. Perhaps this distinction is warranted, yet it nonetheless remains meaningful to take seriously the kinds of alternatives that, to borrow Ferguson's formulation, "contemporaries actually considered." At the same time, Evans's insistence on attending to "both the possible chains of causation and the possible intervention of contingency"[33] should not be overlooked, as it underscores the complexity involved in distinguishing between what was actively contemplated within a specific historical context and what belonged to the broader realm of possibility—bounded, of course, by the structural and contextual limitations of the period, whether social, cultural, political, economic, technological, or otherwise. While not entirely rejecting the usefulness of counterfactualism, Evans notes: "The real interest of close-call counterfactuals is in pointing up the *limited nature* of such possibilities and the *constraints* within which they operated."[34]

Now, to return to my argument about path-dependency and what-matters, I

33） *Altered Pasts*, p. 101.

34） *Altered Pasts*, p. 110. Evans's minimalist counterfactualism is also expressed in the following way: "Based on a minimal rewrite, and confined to the short run, a counterfactual can illuminate the choices that confronted individual politicians and statesmen, and the limitations that the historical context imposed on those choices" (p. 124).

think it would be helpful to distinguish between what the aim and role of historical studies is—or should be—and what an analysis based on what-matters ought to take into consideration. Needless to say, historical studies can serve a variety of aims and roles, but one of the golden rules, I think it is fair to say, is to avoid anachronism, even when engaging in counterfactual analysis.[35)]

That said, avoiding anachronism in historical reconstruction is easier said than done. There are various methodologies and ongoing debates surrounding this challenge, and the efficacy of these approaches often varies depending on the subject matter. For instance, the methods used to reconstruct past events — such as what happened, where, or to whom—may differ significantly from those employed to interpret the history of political thought.[36)] But if we accept that the past was once present—and also acknowledge that the present world is not merely a random illusion but a perceptibly concrete reality (even if confined to the realm of what-seems, as discussed in the previous article)—then it seems reasonable to assume that the past was likewise once an objective reality, though now accessible only through memory, mediated by fictions such as texts, institutions, and practices.

If this is true, then it is possible, in theory, to argue that an accurate historical account is one that reflects past reality as it then existed objectively, while an anachronistic account is one that deviates from it. However, in practice, it is impossible to capture the past—whether in its entirety or even in part—with absolute accuracy, since no method offers direct access to it. As such, there is no way to determine with certainty the degree of accuracy or anachronism in any historical account. In light of this, the historian must remain acutely aware of the gap between theoretical possibility and practical limitation and strive, as far as possible, to approximate accuracy and avoid anachronism. Given these

35) Counterfactual analysis, by definition, explores alternative outcomes that did not occur, but it must begin with a factual, non-anachronistic understanding of historical circumstances up to the point where the counterfactual scenario begins in order to maintain causal plausibility.

36) See for example, Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics: Volume 1, Regarding Method*, Cambridge University Press, 2002; J.G.A. Pocock, *Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method*, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

constraints and the aspirational nature of the goal, the plausibility of any historical account is ultimately judged by the critical consensus of the community of historians.

But for the purposes of my analysis, it is equally important to examine even anachronistic or historically implausible interpretations of past events and ideas—including parlor-game counterfactuals or "social science fiction"[37] — when they have helped shape the opinions and fictions of various individuals and groups over time. What many people believed to be true or found plausible—however unfounded—offers a valid way of understanding the nature of their world or worldview, and not least what mattered to them. This is not, of course, to condone anachronism per se, but to recognize it as a historical fact in its own right—however flawed by historians' standards. As noted earlier, collective memory is often constructed or skewed, whether by design or accident, to the point that it bears little resemblance to what actually occurred—yet it can still impact reality by influencing both opinion and fiction. Moreover, when such speculations capture the imagination of a wide audience, they may reveal the broader public's wishes, desires, anxieties, and disappointments—all of which help shape the current of opinion.[38]

Admittedly, one could still argue that this approach remains within the bounds of traditional academic inquiry—especially in sociology, anthropology, and cultural history. And there, the golden rule still applies. Analyzing anachronism is one thing; practicing it is another. As a scholarly pursuit, it is perfectly legitimate to study, say, the phenomenon of fake news and disinformation—but not to engage in its generation.

My method builds upon various strands of existing scholarship while aiming to extract what-matters from the analysis of path-dependent history—

37） See Tetlock and Parker, "Counterfactual Thought Experiments," p. 30.

38） Evans posits that the recent rise of counterfactual history is linked to the decline of grand ideologies, a growing skepticism toward notions of progress, and the influence of postmodernism (*Altered Pasts*, pp. 28–30). Regarding the first point, he observes that "there is a parallel here, maybe, with the end of providentialist history that enabled writers like D'Israeli, Geoffroy, and Renouvier to start thinking about alternative history in the nineteenth century" (Ibid., p. 29).

specifically by identifying the directional forces that shape opinion at various levels. Ultimately, the goal is to develop a normative framework for understanding and reflecting on politics and political thought on a global scale—one centered on what-matters in politics and what is realizable in the present.

That said, not to get ahead of myself, my point here is simply to explain how different approaches to understanding the past can contribute to articulating what-matters. How we understand and engage with the past reveals a great deal about who we are and what we value in the present. It is important to understand—and to aspire to understand—as accurately as possible what happened in the past: to identify the events, how and why they happened, what other realistic possibilities existed, why those possibilities did not transpire despite certain designs on the part of the actors involved, how justifiable or realistic those designs were, and how they affected opinion, fiction, and thus reality. These are all legitimate aims for historians, traditional or otherwise, to pursue—for they represent efforts to recover the past without becoming anachronistic—and they help illuminate who we are, what we value, and what we hope to achieve.

Equally important and legitimate, I think, is focusing on the evolution of ideas held by actors—be they leaders, thinkers, politicians, journalists, the general public, parties, factions, or other individuals and groups—in relation to changing historical events. Ideas about what can be done and what ought to be done vary across actors, but these ideas are often shaped in response to existing realities and the ongoing consequences of prior actions—consequences that are frequently unintended and unforeseen. In reacting to such developments, actors may revise, refine, or even innovate their ideas.

Tracing the processes by which ideas evolve over time in response to changing circumstances proves especially helpful. By analyzing transformations both in reality and in thought, we can better understand what actors were attempting to achieve, how successful or unsuccessful they were, and how newly emerging, unexpected situations opened alternative avenues for action and imagination. For example, tracing and analyzing Sieyès's thought over the course of his life—before, during, and after the French Revolution—or

examining how the function and meaning of the U.S. Constitution have changed over time can be particularly instructive.

The latter example shows how ideas can become detached from their original contexts and authors, yet continue to function meaningfully within society—even when they are repurposed in ways their originators may not have anticipated or intended. In such cases, understanding how and why particular ideas are revived, reinterpreted, or contested in new historical contexts can help illuminate the shifting contours of what-matters and how these shifts relate to the formation of opinion and reality-generating fiction.

I hope it is now clear in what sense what-matters is inseparable from path-dependency at the communal level. When attempting to identify what-matters—for us in the present as well as for those in the past—we must turn our attention to the specific ways in which we have traversed historical time to arrive at the present: how various events, ideas, opinions, and fictions have conspired to create the reality we now inhabit. In doing so, it is helpful to view history not as something predetermined or inevitable, but rather as a sequence of bygone presents—each containing alternatives and possibilities that ultimately did not come to pass. Seeing the past in this light not only provides a richer understanding of history but also offers greater insight into who we are and what we can and should aspire to realize in the present and future.

Proponents of counterfactual history may point to the tendency of traditional historical studies, which focus solely on factual events of the past, to slip into a deterministic outlook on history. Ferguson's lengthy introduction to *Virtual History* devotes considerable attention to tracing various strands of deterministic historical narratives. Similarly, Tetlock and Parker warn against the "cognitive tyranny of hindsight bias," citing studies in psychology to support their claim.[39)]

To be sure, this reflects a broadly observable human tendency to forget past possibilities and to believe that events could not have unfolded otherwise. Historians and social scientists are not exempt from this bias, as evidenced, for example, by the fact that many now regard the end of the Cold War as inevitable or bound to happen—even though few predicted it or saw it as an imminent possibility at the time.

However, while this tendency is real, it does not follow that historians in the traditional sense are incapable of resisting hindsight bias. Through critical self-awareness, methodological rigor, and sensitivity to historical contingency, historians can—and often do—remain attuned to the uncertainty and openness of past moments.

Moreover, from the perspective of this article, it is important to recall that the past possibilities we imagine in the present are themselves constrained by the scope of imagination shaped by the path-dependent trajectory that has led to the present. In this sense, there is a kind of lock-in—not only in terms of what possibilities are realistically open to us, but also in what is imaginable at all. This has important implications for the notion of realism, a theme that will be explored later.

Thus far, I have sought to explain the conceptual contours of what-matters while deliberately avoiding the presentation of a specific list. This is intentional—not only because such a list would be vast, potentially encompassing domains as varied as culture, manners, morality, religion, and aesthetics, not to mention politics, but also because its specific contents (however narrowed down) are almost invariably multifarious, contested, and historically as well as often locally situated. Any such list, therefore, must be provisional and conditional, open to revision and disagreement.

I have also yet to explain what path-dependency at the intercommunal and global levels entails. In their simplest formulations, the former concerns the historical trajectories of relationships between communities—for example,

39) Tetlock and Parker, "Counterfactual Thought Experiments," p. 15. Citing Baruch Fischhoff's article "Hindsight Is Not Equal to Foresight: The Effect of Outcome Knowledge on Judgment under Uncertainty," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1975, pp. 288–299, Tetlock and Parker make the following assertions: "The psychological argument builds on work in cognitive science to warn of the dangers of the hindsight bias: the powerful tendency of human beings to start forgetting, as soon as we learn what happened, how unpredictable the world looked beforehand and to dedicate ourselves to forging chains of reasons that make what happened appear to be the inevitable outcome of prior causes" (p. 17); "The most effective cure for the intellectual complacency of hindsight bias turns out to be encouraging people to think counterfactually about history" (pp. 27–28).

interstate relations in modern times—while the latter addresses how individuals, groups, and communities—including states and the international community—have been dynamically shaped by the forces of globalization, particularly as led by the West since the advent of modernity.

All of these aspects will be explored in greater detail in relation to what-matters in *politics*.