

What-Matters in Politics (3)

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

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The preceding article introduced the notion of what-matters.¹⁾ This article explores its implications and relevance for politics and political thought, particularly from a global and comparative perspective. To begin, I will briefly recapitulate the notion.

In its broadest sense, what-matters is a shared vectorial notion that relates to the human psychological inclination toward things of subjective importance originating within the sense of self. Its shared character stems from the processes of collective identification, while its vectorial quality derives from its directionality and temporal span.

Moreover, when what-matters manifests as a form of combined psychological momentum, it can induce directional forces that guide as well as amalgamate the diverse opinions of individuals and groups. At its most dynamic and large-scale level, it achieves this through various interconnected fictions—nested within an overarching fiction—capable of providing the community with a sense of coherence and direction. Concurrently, what-matters on a smaller scale (pertaining, for instance, to groups within a community) may exist in tension

1) Ken Tsutsumibayashi, "What-Matters in Politics (2): Some Preliminary Thoughts on How to Think Globally About Politics and Political Thought," *Hogaku Kenkyu (Journal of Law, Politics and Sociology)*, vol. 98, no. 10, 2025, pp. 164–194.

with other configurations; such forces may challenge or push back against the status quo, thereby influencing the future directionality of the community's collective opinion and potentially reshaping the overarching fiction itself.

For our purposes, opinion is defined as a subjective, psychological inclination (and its expression in the form of judgment, belief, or view) attributable to individuals and groups. In this respect, what-matters is cognate with opinion. It is also well to recall that collective opinion is the source of political authority.

Fiction, meanwhile, refers to something imagined and created by human beings—a collective artefact rooted in the mind—the reality of which depends on the sustaining presence of opinion. In this sense, fiction together with opinion serves as the building block of social and political reality. As such, fiction encompasses foundational values such as morality, custom, ideology, and religion, as well as systemic formations like gender, money, society, nation, law, and the state. These are not freestanding entities, nor even merely external rules; they are social imaginaries and institutions, the continued existence of which relies on the sustained, shared psychological inclinations of the members of a community—that is, collective opinion.

Additionally, what-matters is a notion grounded in the present, premised on the ontological assumption that humans can perceive and interpret reality only from their present vantage point. This, in turn, underscores the importance of path-dependency at the communal level for understanding the past, as well as the shared opinions and fictions in the present. As noted in my previous article, by emphasizing path-dependency, I am suggesting an understanding of history that is fundamentally non-teleological; rather than moving toward a predetermined end or purpose, the trajectory of a community is shaped by specific, contingent choices and events that constrain and influence subsequent possibilities.

Thus understood, the notion of what-matters is capacious in scope. It encompasses phenomena ranging from the expression or effect of locally shared opinions to the broader articulations of large-scale communal dispositions oriented toward overarching social and political structures. As I have maintained, these specific manifestations are invariably multifarious, contested, and embedded in particular historical and local contexts—always provisional,

conditional, and open to revision and disagreement. For this reason, I have deliberately refrained from providing a definitive—let alone exhaustive—list of what what-matters entails.

In this article, I aim to narrow the scope and provide greater specificity by discussing what-matters in relation to politics. Drawing on selected scholarly and historical examples, I propose a conceptual scheme or methodology—one intended to facilitate critical engagement with politics and political thought on a global scale, while enabling a comparative approach sensitive to both diversity and change.

Connecting what-matters to politics, however, is not as straightforward as it might appear—not least because politics, like opinion or fiction, is a polysemous term and arguably an essentially contested concept.²⁾ The sheer multiplicity of definitions and interpretive frameworks, compounded by enduring disagreements and controversies, renders any definitive stance exceedingly difficult to attain. This state of affairs lends credibility to the aphorism that “there are almost as many definitions of politics as there are writers on the subject.”

To mention a few examples, some scholars focus primarily on the state and government, following Max Weber, who famously defined the state as the entity that claims a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory. From this institutional starting point, Weber defines politics as the “striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power, either among states or among groups within a state.”³⁾ This view centers on power and authority exercised through formal structures—though, as noted, Weber was equally concerned with the subjective meanings that underlie legitimacy and with the sociological foundations of authority.

Others broaden the concept of politics beyond a predominantly institutional focus. Harold Lasswell—known for his contributions to political

2) W.B. Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 56, 1955–1956, pp. 167–198. The “live examples” Gallie considers in this article are “art,” “democracy,” “social justice,” and “Christian life.” One might plausibly include “politics” as well, given that it satisfies most, if not all, of the defining conditions required to qualify as an essentially contested concept.

psychology, behavioralism, and communication theory—offered the influential formulation: “who gets what, when, how.”⁴⁾ This approach emphasizes the distribution of resources and influence, focusing less on formal institutions and more on the practical dynamics of power in society.⁵⁾ Lasswell’s work helped lay the foundation for later behavioral theorists, including David Easton, who defined politics as “the authoritative allocation of values for a society.”⁶⁾ Easton’s definition, a cornerstone of behavioral political science, highlights the processes through which binding and legitimate decisions are made and enforced within a political system.

Other definitions depart even more sharply from institutional or distributive models. Carl Schmitt, for instance, argued that the essence of “the political” lies in the distinction between friend and enemy, grounding politics in the possibility of existential conflict, while remaining ultimately concerned with the survival of the state and its authority to assert unity and act decisively in moments of crisis.⁷⁾ Michel Foucault, by contrast, conceived of power not merely as something possessed by the state but as a pervasive and productive force operating throughout society. For Foucault, politics concerns how power shapes knowledge, discourse, and individual subjectivity through diffuse practices of discipline and surveillance.⁸⁾

3) Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, edited and translated by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, Routledge, 2009, pp. 111–189 (pp. 112–113). Weber, in this famous work, also emphasized the importance of certain character traits—or an ethos—that he believed politicians must possess. For an insightful analysis of political ethos in Weber and other thinkers, see Joshua L. Cherniss, *Liberalism in Dark Times: The Liberal Ethos in the Twentieth Century*, Princeton University Press, 2021.

4) Harold D. Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How*, Whittlesey House, 1936.

5) According to Laswell, “the study of politics is the study of influence and the influential” (*Ibid.*, p. 3), and deference, income, and safety—though not intended as an exhaustive list of political values—serve as key measures of influence and as central values sought by the influential (or elite).

6) David Easton, *The Political System: An Inquiry into the State of Political Science*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1953, pp. 129–134.

7) Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, translated by George Schwab, University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Meanwhile, Hannah Arendt defined politics as the realm of human action and speech in the public sphere, where individuals come together as equals to deliberate, persuade, and initiate new possibilities. She distinguished this from labor or work, viewing politics as the space in which freedom is manifested through collective action rather than as a domain of rule or administration.⁹⁾

Further still, feminist scholars have challenged the traditional public-private divide in political theory, arguing that politics extends deeply into private life. The well-known assertion that “the personal is political” highlights how power relations and inequality shape spheres traditionally regarded as non-political, such as the family, the workplace, and intimate relationships. Thinkers such as Carole Pateman, Iris Marion Young, bell hooks, and Nancy Fraser have expanded feminist critiques of this divide in different ways: Pateman exposes how patriarchal social contracts underwrite modern political authority; Young emphasizes structural injustice and the politics of difference; hooks illuminates how race, gender, and class intersect in everyday relations of domination; and Fraser analyzes the shifting boundaries between public and private under capitalism. Their work demonstrates that political analysis cannot be limited to formal institutions or the public sphere alone but must account for the pervasive dynamics of power in everyday life.¹⁰⁾

Building on this critique of the public-private dichotomy, the ethic of care introduces a distinct normative dimension to political thought. Proponents such

8) Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan, Pantheon Books, 1977.

9) Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, 1958.

10) The phrase “the personal is political” is widely associated with the second-wave feminist movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. Although it did not originate from a single source, it emphasizes that issues traditionally deemed private—such as domestic labor, sexuality, and family roles—are shaped by broader political and social structures. See Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, Stanford University Press, 1988, *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory*, Polity Press, 1989; Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton University Press, 1990, *Inclusion and Democracy*, Oxford University Press, 2000; bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*, South End Press, 1981; Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*, Polity Press, 1989.

as Carol Gilligan and Joan Tronto argue that politics should not be viewed solely through the lenses of abstract rights or competitive power, but through the lens of responsiveness and relational responsibility.¹¹⁾ While Gilligan's foundational work challenged the primacy of the justice-based orientation—historically normed as a “masculine” morality—in favor of a relational “ethic of care,” Tronto moved this concept into the heart of political theory. She argues that “caring” is a central political activity, defining it as “a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible.”¹²⁾

These examples—ranging from institutional authority and resource distribution to existential struggle, discursive power, identity, everyday life, and care—illustrate the breadth and internal tensions of contemporary conceptions of politics. One might, however, point out that even these wide-ranging perspectives remain somewhat one-sided; they are, in one way or another, attempts to theorize politics within the horizon of modernity and primarily—though not exclusively—within a Western intellectual milieu.

It might thus be contended that extending the discussion to include

11) Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Harvard University Press, 1982; Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, Routledge, 1993; Joan Tronto, *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice*, New York University Press, 2013. For an excellent analysis of these and other works on the ethic(s) of care—including their relationship to feminism and significance for political theory, with added reference to their relevance to contemporary Japan—see Yayo Okano, *The Ethics of Care: The Political Thought of Feminism*, Iwanami Publishers, 2024 [in Japanese].

12) Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, p. 103; *Caring Democracy*, p. 19. As Tronto notes, this definition first appeared in the following co-authored article: Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto, “Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring,” in *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women's Lives*, edited by Emily K. Abel and Margaret K. Nelson, State University of New York Press, 1990, pp. 35–62 (p. 40). In *Caring Democracy*, Tronto recasts Lasswell's definition of politics in the following way: “Indeed, we might want to substitute for Harold Lasswell's (1936) succinct definition of politics, as ‘who gets what, when and how,’ one that sees it a way to divide up responsibilities: who is responsible for caring for what, when, where, and how” (p. 31). Interestingly, Tronto also emphasizes the importance of path-dependency (p. 63).

premodern or non-Western conceptions of politics is an essential undertaking, particularly from the perspective of comparative political thought. While I endorse this stance, doing so at this preliminary stage would introduce excessive complexity due to the linguistic challenges of translating political vocabularies across vastly different contexts. Of course, one could argue that navigating such complexity is precisely the aim of comparative political thought. Indeed, many valuable works have succeeded in showing how words and concepts from different traditions correspond through similarities in logic or function, or through complex processes of influence and translation.¹³⁾

However, to avoid the excessive complexity mentioned above and provide a more accessible framework for comparative analysis—one that moves beyond West-centered models or the reduction of the non-West to a mere series of case studies¹⁴⁾—a new starting point is required. I therefore propose a methodology derived from the notion of what-matters. By establishing this framework, I aim to provide a conceptually inclusive ground that is neither strictly Western nor non-Western, designed specifically to illuminate political thought and action across diverse times and spaces.

I argue that, despite their divergent focuses, most understandings of politics—or human activities that can meaningfully be described as such—share a fundamental substrate, whether they emanate from Western or non-Western traditions. They posit the existence of a stable and relatively orderly human association founded on shared or compatible values. Whether the focus is on institutional structures of authority, networks of social care, or diverse

13) Hiroshi Watanabe's book is a classic example that demonstrates not only how political terms have transformed over time under various influences but also how apparent correspondences can conceal significant differences in nuance and effect. See Hiroshi Watanabe, *Tatoeba "jiyu" wa liberty ka?* (Say, Is "Jiyu" Liberty?), Iwanami Publishers, 2025 [in Japanese].

14) For a critique of this approach, see Leigh Jenco, "What Does Heaven Ever Say? A Methods-centered Approach to Cross-cultural Engagement," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 101, no. 4, 2007, pp. 741–755; Leigh Jenco, "Recentering Political Theory, Revisited: On Mobile Locality, General Applicability, and the Future of Comparative Political Theory," in Melissa Williams (ed), *Deparochializing Political Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 60–92.

communal arrangements, these varied approaches ultimately reflect a shared endeavor: the search for a form of association or rule that aligns variegated communal values to secure an enduring social order. This further implies that the associational framework must be sustained by the type of opinion that induces voluntary compliance from its constituents (rulers and governed alike) toward the overall structure of authority. Since all human associations rely on fiction—the reality of which must be sustained by collective opinion as the source of authority—politics necessarily involves an effort to gravitate opinion toward that fiction, especially the overarching fiction that serves as the foundation and framework of collective life. This is achieved, as already explained, through the effect of the “language of legitimacy.”¹⁵⁾

Thus, what-matters in politics must be seen through the lens of this interplay between opinion, fiction, and the language of legitimacy—as it unfolds in various historical contexts. It is worth recalling that, when discussing legitimacy, my focus is first and foremost on the functional effect of the language of legitimacy. I distinguish this language into two types: the “language of legitimacy in a general sense” and the “theory of legitimacy,” the latter being a subcategory of the former.

The language of legitimacy in a general sense (or simply the “language of legitimacy”) is the primary category, as it encompasses a wide range of verbal as well as non-verbal locutions—or “texts”¹⁶⁾—intended to gravitate opinion toward fictions in a sustained manner, especially toward the overarching fiction. These texts, which are themselves fictions in their own right, include everything from systematized bodies of knowledge and theories to oral traditions, customs, rituals, habits, manners, symbols, signs, architecture, music, dance, theater, and art. They psychologically incline individuals toward voluntary compliance with

15) See Ken Tsutsumibayashi, “What-Matters in Politics (1): Some Preliminary Thoughts on How to Think Globally About Politics and Political Thought,” *Hogaku Kenkyu* (*Journal of Law, Politics and Sociology*), vol. 98, no. 2, 2025, pp. 126–160 (pp. 126–136).

16) As previously noted, I follow James Tully in this expansive application of the term “texts.” See James Tully, “Deparochializing Political Theory and Beyond: A Dialogue Approach to Comparative Political Thought,” in Melissa Williams (ed), *Deparochializing Political Theory*, pp. 25–59 (pp. 34–35).

a ruling authority. The theory of legitimacy, by contrast, is a subcategory of the language of legitimacy that designates only the kind of language that is verbal and explicit about the rationale for obedience to authority. It is therefore manifested through systematized bodies of knowledge or theory.

Thus defined, the language of legitimacy is the implicit grammar of any stable and enduring community, regardless of its era, geography, or scale. By focusing on the workings of this language—whether its “texts” are verbal or non-verbal—we gain a topological ground to analyze and compare how diverse texts across various human associations function to orient opinion toward an overarching fiction composed of multiple constituent fictions.

Of course, non-verbal texts may often appear unrelated to the system of rule, especially when they do not explicitly state or explain why the members of a particular community must obey the rulers or the commanding authority. This is clearly seen, for example, in what Clifford Geertz famously described as the nineteenth-century Balinese “theatre state.”¹⁷⁾ In this model, the state was not a functional apparatus for tax or war, but a theatricalization of metaphysics designed to dramatize the cosmic order. Through mass rituals, cremation ceremonies, and temple festivals, the state existed as a lived spectacle; by participating in these elaborate performances, subjects were not merely “watching” the king, but physically enacting a vectorial alignment with a divine hierarchy. As Geertz’s analysis suggests, the language of legitimacy in such a context is not a mere secondary justification for a pre-existing power; rather, power often serves the language. The non-verbal texts of ritual and spectacle are the primary means of gravitating the multiplicity of sometimes disparate opinions toward the overarching fiction, rendering the cosmic order a lived

17) Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali*, Princeton University Press, 1980, pp. 13–35. While some historians have critiqued Geertz for underestimating the complexity, instability, fragmentation, and fluidity of the Balinese state (see, for example, Henk Schulte Nordholt, *The Spell of Power: A History of Balinese Politics, 1650-1940*, KITLV Press, 1996), his work still provides a valid analysis of how non-verbal texts—rituals and spectacles—serve to gravitate opinion toward an overarching fiction, thereby allowing for a stable and durable community sustained by the voluntary compliance of its constituents.

reality for the community.

This “somatic” or bodily orientation toward authority is equally central to many precolonial African societies. Here, the associational bond between ruler and ruled was maintained through sophisticated “affective” expressions—sonic, ritual, and physical—rather than written decrees. While the Balinese model emphasizes the visual spectacle of the hierarchy, the African associational bond often functioned as a palpable manifestation of mutual energy and rhythmic resonance.

In these contexts, legitimacy was not a verbally expressed rationale but a lived experience of shared vital rhythm and performative somatic roles maintained through communal participation. It is through these subtle, non-verbal texts—the “theatre” of spectacle and the “affective” resonance of ritual—that collective opinion is directed toward the overarching fiction, generating the psychological momentum that sustains the social order.¹⁸⁾

The efficacy of these non-verbal texts is further corroborated by a growing body of research across anthropology, cultural history, and the history of emotions. These studies demonstrate how diverse modalities—from the rhythmic to the ritualistic—function as a primary language of legitimacy, providing the necessary coherence and order for a community to persist. Furthermore, this framework allows for a plausible comparison with societies that rely primarily on a theory of legitimacy. As previously noted, even those communities that prioritize explicit, systematized rationales for obedience invariably buttress their authority by resorting to pomp, circumstance, and symbolic or emotive narratives to orient opinion toward the overarching fiction. By focusing on the functional substrate of what-matters in politics, we gain a topological ground to analyze how all human associations—regardless of their relative reliance on the verbal or the non-verbal—strive to align communal values and secure an enduring social order.¹⁹⁾

However, one of the purposes of introducing the notion of what-matters is to move beyond a static taxonomy of order and instead illuminate the processes of change. By examining the shifting forces within and between communities—constituted by the interplay of opinion, fiction, and the language of legitimacy—we can better understand how these tensions affect the

directionality of collective opinion and the reshaping of overarching fictions, as well as their constituent fictions, over time.

As previously noted, what-matters also manifests as locally shared opinions that may exist in tension with other fictions—both large and small—within a single community. It is around these shared opinions that groups coalesce, generating the psychological momentum necessary to influence or push back against dominant configurations. In so doing, they transform the constituent

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- 18) This “vital rhythm” alludes to the polyrhythmic nature of social life as explored in Henri Lefebvre’s rhythmanalysis. See Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, translated by Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore, Continuum, 2004. Here, the term captures a field of coexisting and interacting temporalities—ritual, social, affective, and bodily—whose relative alignment produces a sense of coherence, and whose misalignment may generate tension, dissonance, or transformation. While Geertz’s formulation of the “theatre state” focuses primarily on the legible visual hierarchy, I supplement his model with this rhythmic and somatic focus to highlight the internal, felt experience of that hierarchy by the participants. In this view, the theatre state is enacted through a polyrhythmic configuration where multiple temporalities converge and are momentarily synchronized, reinforcing the overarching fiction of cosmic order. Significantly, however, these rhythms do not fully collapse into a permanent unity; their partial and contingent alignment leaves open the constant possibility of arrhythmia. It is through such rhythmic breakdowns—where the felt experience of the “spectacle” or “resonance” diverges from the dominant fiction—that the existing political configuration may be strained or reconfigured over time. In a similar vein, the term references the “vital force” (*force vitale*) articulated by Placide Tempels, who argues that African metaphysics is centered on a dynamic, rather than static, conception of being. See Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, translated by Colin King, Présence Africaine, 1959. I refer to this notion while remaining mindful of the critique of “ethnophilosophy” offered by Paulin Hountondji (*African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, translated by Henri Evans and Jonathan Rée, Indiana University Press, 1983) and others. For an overview, see Katrin Flikschuh, “Africa and the Possibility of Philosophy: Paulin Hountondji’s Intellectual Legacy,” *African Studies Review*, vol. 67, no. 2, 2024, pp. 459–463. Here, I treat “vital force” not as a universal ontological claim but as a functional substrate for how non-verbal texts sustain collective opinion. It is, however, important to acknowledge the diversity of interpretation regarding this issue. For a different perspective, see John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Heinemann, 1969. For recent scholarship on controversies surrounding vitality, see Aribiah David Attioe and Amara Esther Chimakonam, *The Notion of Vitality in African Philosophy of Religion*, Cambridge University Press, 2025.

fictions of their society and, potentially, the overarching fiction itself. Of course, an individual may be attached to several groups or views simultaneously, finding themselves the site of conflict between competing opinions and fictions.²⁰⁾

Consequently, when analyzing the transformative processes of communities, it is insufficient to focus solely on the thought and action of leaders. While it is understandable to prioritize elite decision-making—as is frequently the case in political and diplomatic histories dealing with momentous historical events, and particularly in counterfactual studies—given that crucial decisions regarding, for instance, war or alliances often trigger immense structural shifts, one must also examine how various individuals and groups within the community accept, adapt to, or push back against such shifts, while simultaneously experiencing internal transformations in their own opinions. In other words, the views of the ruled exert a substantial, non-negligible influence on the final character of a transformed community. This is especially true since, as previously established, collective opinion remains the ultimate source of political authority.

In discussing path-dependency at the communal level in my previous article, I noted the inherent difficulty in identifying the determining causes of a shift in historical trajectory. While leaders may make significant decisions, these choices rarely unfold entirely according to plan. Such decisions almost

19) See, for example, David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power*, Yale University Press, 1988, especially pp. 67–76 and 95–101. Kertzer's cross-cultural analysis provides a foundational sociological mechanism for what I describe as the gravitation of opinion toward a fiction through non-verbal texts. His central concept of "solidarity without consensus" posits that ritual allows for collective identification and external coordination without requiring participants to hold identical internal beliefs. In the terminology of this study, Kertzer demonstrates how the vectorial quality of what-matters can be synchronized through ritual action, creating a shared psychological momentum toward an overarching fiction while bypassing the need for a shared explicit theory or cognitive agreement. See also Sean Wilentz (ed.), *Rites of Power: Symbolism, Ritual, and Politics Since the Middle Ages*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985.

20) This internal tension is evident if one recalls that opinion is invariably an opinion *about* something, and that this *something* is almost always a fiction. Consequently, an individual may harbor opinions inclined toward disparate fictions that exist in tension with one another.

invariably generate a wake of unintended consequences. This challenge is further compounded by the opacity surrounding a community's combined psychological momentum—its amorphous character and its latent effects, as well as its unforeseen responses to the possible friction between a leader's intent and the resulting reality. However, these complexities do not merely obscure our view; they underscore the necessity of tracking the manifestations of what-matters across different scales. To understand how communities actually transform—and how they differ—we must apply the framework of path-dependency not only to the internal evolution of a single community but also to intercommunal interactions or collisions and, ultimately, to the global shifts that define our shared history. By so doing, we move from a static description of order to a dynamic methodology capable of capturing the fluid, contested nature of politics on a worldwide scale.

But let us proceed step by step and begin by examining the directional force of what-matters as it influences shared orientations. When individual opinions coalesce around specific fictions, they tend to form identifiable groups. These fictions, sustained by the cumulative weight of collective opinion, assume a semblance of objective reality. Once established, they can command authority of sorts and give rise to distinct power relationships. This process is most profound in the case of the overarching fiction, which provides the foundational structure for all other constituent fictions within a community. In this sense, the overarching fiction serves as the final meta-horizon of political authority or the ultimate arbiter of the community's shared reality.

While fictions differ in their level of constraint—particularly regarding physical and psychological repercussions—the overarching fiction and other entrenched group fictions appear particularly resilient. Unlike voluntary associations or aesthetic preferences, which tend to ensure a relative alignment between individual opinion and shared fiction because they are largely derived from personal preference, the fiction that underwrites a structure of command and obedience is not easily abandoned. Consequently, it becomes a source of greater tension within an individual or group when their opinion deviates from it. The overarching fiction, as well as entrenched group fictions within it, function in a way that is somewhat similar to what Max Weber termed an

Anstalt (a compulsory institution): a formal association that, while ultimately dependent on the underlying support of opinion, presents itself as more robust and constraining than the diverse, smaller-scale fictions that do not rest on a power relationship characterized by command and obedience. It is well to remember that while fiction depends on opinion for its reality, it also reciprocally shapes that opinion; consequently, some fictions exert significantly more influence than others. Even in pre-modern or non-Western contexts where “rules” are not encoded in a modern legal bureaucracy, the *Anstalt*-like nature of such fictions ensures that the communal order is experienced not as a choice, but as an objective and mandatory framework of existence.²¹⁾

Furthermore, while diverse and often competing fictions can coexist under one overarching framework, there is an inherent limit to this pluralism. Fictions that appear fundamentally incompatible with the overarching fiction are likely to be repressed or expunged, leading to alienation, persecution, or expulsion. Even a community that expressly defends the principle of toleration cannot, as

21) Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, University of California Press, 1978, pp. 52–53. Weber defines the *Anstalt* (compulsory association) as a social group whose enacted regulations are effectively imposed on every individual who meets certain criteria (such as birth or residence), regardless of their personal consent. I employ this term as a functional heuristic to describe the seemingly “inescapable” quality of fictions that rest on a power relationship of command and obedience. While Weber’s primary historical examples—the modern state and the church—reflect a specific Western developmental trajectory toward rational-legal bureaucracy, the functional core of the *Anstalt* rests on the successful imposition of an order that presents itself as an objective reality—though, ultimately, as I mentioned in my previous article with reference to Berger and Luckmann, it is a reality in the sense of a “humanly produced, constructed objectivity.” My application extends this to pre-modern and non-Western contexts where the “compulsory” nature of the association is maintained through ritual, custom, or cosmic spectacle rather than formal-legal codes. This *Anstalt*-like robustness is characteristic of any fiction—whether overarching or entrenched at a group level—that demands compliance, yet the overarching fiction remains unique as the final meta-horizon and ultimate arbiter of the community’s shared reality. Crucially, however, the “objective” weight of such fictions remains contingent; because their reality is ultimately sustained by collective opinion, any significant deviation or shift toward alternative fictions necessarily transforms the social and political reality they underpin.

the classic paradox suggests, tolerate the intolerant if it wishes to maintain order and stability. Every overarching fiction possesses a threshold beyond which certain group identities and beliefs cannot be accommodated. When this tension manifests not only within a single community but between communities with rival fictions, it can escalate into violent conflict.²²⁾

Incidentally, the directionality of these fictions is never static. Driven by factors such as demographic shifts, economic restructuring, technological advances, the emergence of new ideas, or the trauma of catastrophe, a relatively small group within a community may expand its adherents and radically transform both collective opinion and its directed fiction. We see this most clearly in the historical influence of religious movements, where a once-marginalized fiction eventually replaces others and reshapes the existing overarching fiction, along with its attendant language of legitimacy.

Needless to say, these tensions and changes occur at the intercommunal level as well. When communities interact—whether through peaceful exchange, coercive pressure, or violent collision—the resulting tensions are often resolved through the dominance, negotiated alignment, or incorporation of one overarching fiction over another. A dominant party may at times impose its fiction or, more complexly, incorporate the other into a new framework. Such an expansion—whether achieved through peaceful acculturation, forced assimilation, or conquest—inevitably transforms the constituent communities’

22) It would, however, be too simplistic to assume that incompatible fictions are destined to be simply expunged or extinguished. While colonial rule may have imposed one overarching fiction over another, there are instances in which subjected peoples pushed back, maintaining a degree of spiritual independence through the imaginative adaptation of alien cultures while preserving their core identity. A notable historical example is the development of “colonial cosmopolitanism” in nineteenth-century Southeast Asia. As Nobuto Yamamoto observes, “since the middle of the nineteenth century, the very infrastructure designed to serve imperial control has become the fertile ground for new forms of cross-cultural connection and resistance” (Nobuto Yamamoto, “The World Came to You: A Portrait of Colonial Cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia,” *Hogaku Kenkyu (Journal of Law, Politics and Sociology)*, vol. 98, no. 11, 2025, pp. 186–220 [p. 194]). See also Benedict Anderson, “Colonial Cosmopolitanism,” in *Social Science and Knowledge in a Globalizing World*, edited by Zawawi Ibrahim, SIRD, 2012, pp. 371–387.

overarching fictions, forcing the resulting social order to transform into a form of rule capable (if at all) of governing larger, more heterogeneous populations and a wider diversity of opinions.

It follows that to understand the global landscape of political thought, we must analyze these transformational processes through the lens of path-dependency at the intercommunal level and observe how they ultimately transpire on a global scale. The historical trajectory of any given political order is not merely the result of internal change, but the consequence of external encounters—or collisions—and the subsequent realignment of collective fictions.

I will eventually explore how these interactions led to a world where a specific strain of the language of legitimacy—namely, democracy or popular sovereignty—eventually came to predominate. This exploration will also consider the implications for our present, the potential risks and possibilities for the future, and how a normative dimension of what-matters may aid us in addressing these critical issues. Before elaborating on these global realignments, however, we must further clarify the conceptual contours of what-matters in politics to ensure it serves as a robust tool for our analysis.

Building upon the assumption that what-matters is cognate with opinion, it constitutes a specific modality of subjective inclination—one grounded in perceived importance with a distinct proclivity for orienting other opinions and fictions. While it can manifest as a form of combined psychological momentum, it serves primarily as a conceptual scheme constructed to render opaque historical processes intelligible. In this sense, what-matters is not a *sui generis* entity but an analytical category whose validity is derived from its capacity to illuminate the fluid dynamics of collective life.

Accordingly, this framework provides the common ground necessary for comparative analysis across diverse contexts. It facilitates an understanding not only of how we arrived at the present through the non-teleological and path-dependent passage of time but also where we might—and ought to—meaningfully proceed. Ultimately, what-matters in politics is inseparable from the collective endeavor of maintaining and transforming the fictions that sustain a durable community; it is the lens through which we identify the various scales

of significance that organize social life across multiple dimensions.

If what-matters is understood in this sense, how do we identify it, and how should it be incorporated into our analysis? Here, the methodological efficacy of anthropology, cultural history, and the history of emotions becomes apparent. The relatively new field of the history of emotions—while hardly monolithic—is particularly instructive; it frequently addresses the shifting interplay between subjective experience and political power, with meticulous attention to both context and contingency. Although the field emerged as a method for studying Western history, it has undergone a significant global turn, increasingly incorporating non-Western traditions and colonial contexts. By examining how diverse societies establish normative “grammars” of expression and habituate values through bodily practices, the field offers invaluable insights for identifying what mattered to whom, in what ways, and how those values were manifested within specific normative contexts. Ultimately, wherever emotions run high, they serve as a diagnostic indicator of an underlying, and often contested, notion of what-matters.²³⁾

That said, what-matters should not be conflated with “raw” emotion, nor with the conceptual renditions of emotional practices found in current scholarship. Rather, it represents the underlying substrate of significance around which these diverse emotions and practices cluster. To illustrate this distinction and articulate the unique analytical purchase of what-matters, I shall briefly take as an example the notion of free consent as a precondition for political obligation.

The requirement of consent—the idea that the legitimacy of a collective order rests upon the subjective agreement of its members—is not an exclusively modern or Western invention. Historically, consensus in various forms has provided the indispensable mechanism for organizing human collectivities across the globe.²⁴⁾ There are innumerable examples to this effect, but the importance of consent is hardly surprising if we acknowledge that opinion is the ultimate source of political authority.

However, it is one thing to say that consent—which can range from tacit agreement to express promises and contracts—serves a role in social organization; it is quite another to state that “free consent,” of the kind

institutionalized through suffrage systems and representative government, serves

23) While my notion of what-matters is analytically distinct from “emotions,” the field of the history of emotions provides a useful methodological toolbox for identifying how communal values are formed and sustained. According to Katie Barclay and Peter N. Stearns, “research in emotions history typically works to identify the kinds of emotional standards a society or group seeks to implement (both positive and negative), while also looking for indications of actual emotional experience and expression” (“Introduction,” in Katie Barclay and Peter N. Stearns [eds], *The Routledge History of Emotions in the Modern World*, Routledge, 2023, pp. 1–10 [p. 4]). Elsewhere, Katie Barclay states that “the history of emotion explores how people in the past conceived of, explained and experienced emotions within particular cultures and contexts, with particular attention to variation in experience and historical change” (*The History of Emotions: A Student Guide to Methods and Sources*, Macmillan, 2020, p. 9). More specifically, my framework is compatible with Peter N. Stearns and Carol Z. Stearns’s concept of “emotionology,” which delineates the collective emotional standards a society maintains to uphold its social and political institutions (“Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards,” *American Historical Review*, vol. 90, no. 4, 1985, pp. 813–836). This approach can be viewed alongside William M. Reddy’s theory based on “emotional regime,” defined as “the set of normative emotions and the official rituals, practices, and emotives [a type of speech act that both describes and changes the world] that express and inculcate them; a necessary underpinning of any stable political regime” (*The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, [p. 129]). Similarly, the “multifarious and contested” nature of what-matters within a single community is illuminated by Barbara H. Rosenwein’s “emotional communities” (*Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages*, Cornell University Press, 2006). Furthermore, my emphasis on non-verbal “languages of legitimacy” resonates with Monique Scheer’s focus on “emotional practices,” which demonstrates how collective orientations are habituated and sustained through bodily performances and social rituals (“Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (and Is That What Makes Them Have a History)? A Bourdieuan Approach to Understanding Emotion,” *History and Theory*, vol. 51, no. 2, 2012, pp. 193–220). Significantly, recent scholarship has moved beyond its initial West-centered focus to apply these frameworks globally, demonstrating the efficacy of the field for identifying what mattered within diverse settings. See, for example, Susan J. Matt and Peter N. Stearns (eds), *Doing Emotions History*, University of Illinois Press, 2014; Margrit Pernau, *Emotions and Modernity in Colonial India*, Oxford University Press, 2019; Benno Gammerl, Philipp Nielsen, and Margrit Pernau (eds), *Encounters with Emotions: Negotiating Cultural Differences since Early Modernity*, Berghahn Books, 2019; Katie Barclay and Peter N. Stearns (eds), *The Routledge History of Emotions in the Modern World*, Routledge, 2023.

as the foundational basis of political obligation. It is this specific, formalized iteration of consent that became increasingly significant as what-matters in modern politics.

While there are various precursors, this modern version rose to prominence as a theory in the seventeenth-century Europe, following the religious wars that gave rise to another pivotal political fiction: state sovereignty. Although this change was not a linear or progressive evolution—and while the newly established theory of legitimacy based on free consent did not immediately displace traditional discourses of divine right or hereditary hierarchy—it eventually came to define what-matters in politics globally. This shift was driven not by teleological or providential forces, but often through conflict and domination, shaped by contingent human actions and unintended consequences,

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- 24) The requirement of consent is a recurring substrate in the language of legitimacy across diverse global traditions. For precolonial African societies, though hardly monolithic, the philosophical logic of consensus is articulated in Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*, Indiana University Press, 1996, and Jean-Godefroy Bidima, *La Palabre: Une juridiction de la parole*, Michalon, 2015; for historical and transitional accounts, see George B.N. Ayittey, *Indigenous African Institutions*, Transnational Publishers, 1991, Ramkrishna Mukherjee, *The Problem of Uganda: A Study in Acculturation*, Akademie-Verlag, 1956, and Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, Princeton University Press, 1996. For the Islamic notion of consent pertaining to government and its associated concepts such as *bay'a* (allegiance), see Muhammad Asad, *The Principles of State and Government in Islam*, University of California Press, 1961, and Antony Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought: From the Prophet to the Present*, second edition, Edinburgh University Press, 2011. In the case of the Iroquois' Great Law of Peace, which required unanimity to validate confederacy decisions, see Donald S. Lutz, "The Iroquois Confederation Constitution: An Analysis," *Publius*, vol. 28, no. 2, 1998, pp. 99–127, and Dean R. Snow, *The Iroquois*, Blackwell, 1994. In the traditional South Asian Panchayat system, the local administration and social order were maintained through unanimous consensus and the moral authority of custom, functioning as a self-sufficient unit rooted in communal obligation (H. D. Malaviya, *Village Panchayats in India*, Indian National Congress, 1956). Even in decentralized or "stateless" contexts, such as the medieval Icelandic *Althing* or the early Germanic *Thing*, the performative and public expression of agreement served as the essential social glue (Jesse Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, Penguin, 2001). In many of these contexts, consent served as the foundation around which emotions of loyalty, communal honor, and mutual obligation clustered.

which for later generations became a path-dependent reality. Regardless of the moral evaluation of the actions and events that led to this trajectory, we live today in a world where the sovereign state predominates as the basic unit of collective human life, with the mechanism of political authorization typically rooted in express consent via elections. This holds true for liberal democracies and most autocracies alike; the entrenched nature of this system is demonstrated by the fact that once the right to vote is granted, it is rarely revoked. The few instances where this right has been rescinded only underscore the degree to which a minority's opinion was in tension with the community's overarching fiction.

In the final analysis, while the historical shift in the language of legitimacy and its attendant fictions may be accompanied or even driven by a range of emotions—from the fervor of hope, enthusiasm, and zeal to the corrosive pressures of indignation, anxiety, and despair—the conviction that free consent must constitute the basis of political obligation represents more than a discrete emotional response. While this conviction cannot be fully disentangled from the emotions that surround it, it functions less as an emotional practice and more as the conceptual scheme—the orienting aim and directional force—that I wish to call what-matters.

The historical incorporation of this conceptual scheme into the theory of legitimacy—expressed as democracy or popular sovereignty—will be treated in a future study, taking into account its context-specific ramifications. I will also expand upon the normative dimension of what-matters, specifically exploring its efficacy as a framework for analyzing politics and political thought on a global scale.

To conclude this article, it is necessary to clarify how free consent, understood as what-matters, relates to the foundational notions of this study. Fiction, as established, is a collective artefact rooted in the mind, while opinion is a subjective psychological inclination attributable to individuals and groups. Crucially, opinion relates to fiction in such a way that it is almost invariably an opinion *about* a fiction. In this sense, free consent is a fiction that is sustained and rendered real by opinion. While it is an ideational construct that possesses no existence independent of human consciousness, it functions as a “reality-

producing” fiction. It is entirely possible to hold an opinion regarding free consent, and when such an opinion is formulated as a shared, vectorial notion—the collective orientation that “free consent matters”—it manifests as what-matters.

However, as both opinion and what-matters rest ultimately on subjective psychological inclinations, and not on some universally valid or metaphysically founded truth, they are durable only to the extent that they remain operatively existent. Should these inclinations dissipate or shift their orientation toward an alternative fiction, the very contours of the social and political reality that this fiction currently constitutes will inevitably transform.

Moreover, opinion remains the source of political authority only insofar as Hume’s insight holds: “as FORCE is always on the side of the governed, the governors have nothing to support them but opinion.” But what if force ceases to remain on the side of the governed? What if, as a consequence, opinion loses its political clout? If, for any reason, the potency of opinion becomes nullified, then the political fiction and the language of legitimacy based on the procurement of opinion toward sustaining them—including free consent—may itself collapse. Such a shift would not merely be a change in overarching political fiction, but would signal the end of politics as we presently understand it. This is a theme to which we shall return.