

# A genealogy of politics: Vindictory, pragmatic, and realist

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## Abstract

In Western democracies, people harbor feelings of disgust or hatred for politics. Populists and technocrats even seemingly question the value of politics. Populists cry that they are not politicians and that politics is necessarily corrupt. From the opposite side, technocrats view politics as a pointless constraint on enacting the obviously right policies. Are Western democracies facing a rejection of politics? And is politics worth defending? This paper offers a vindictory genealogy of politics, vindicating the need human beings have for this practice and clarifying the extent of its contemporary rejections. To achieve these contributions, the paper connects the literatures on pragmatic genealogy and on political realism, revealing how they can complement each other. Following pragmatic genealogy, the practice of politics is vindicated, because it meets an inevitable *functional need* for collectively binding decision-making. However, and importantly, political realism allows us to see that the *functional mechanisms* through which politics fulfills this need vary contextually and thus require careful empirical scrutiny. The paper thus dispels confusion about seeming rejections of politics by clarifying what is unavoidable, and what is revisable about politics.

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The term “politics” seems to be acquiring a negative connotation. In Western democracies, people have less and less trust in individual politicians and political institutions. In most of these democracies, party political organization and voter turnout have been decreasing for decades (Schäfer and Zürn, 2021). People even seem to harbor feelings of disgust or hatred for politics. This diagnosis is shared by political science (Hay, 2007; Wood, 2021) and ethnographic accounts, such as Clarke et al. (2018). Do these views signify a full-blown rejection of politics? Do we stand on the edge of losing politics? Or are these attitudes and views just instances of bad-mouthing of one particular way of practicing or defining politics to advocate for another? It is clear that these questions need to be addressed in order to mount a fitting defense of politics.

Simply working out the “correct” meaning of politics to address these questions is no option, as the meaning of politics is “essentially contested” (Gallie, 1955). Unsurprisingly, many conceptualizations have been defended by political scientists and political theorists. Some associate the term politics with all the activities that are commonly thought of as political, which however results in an expanded term with little explanatory power (Leftwich, 1984). Most thinkers thus propose definitions that are somewhat revisionist of ordinary language. Some of these qualify politics by reference to the specific means of power (Jouvenel 2000), legitimate monopolistic coercion (Weber, [1919] 2004), or simply to the institutional *locus* of power (Sartori, 1973). Another common approach has been to equate politics to the existence and management of conflict (Warren, 1999). Politics has also been characterized functionally by its output, as authoritative distribution of values (Easton, 1965) or as preference aggregation (Ostrom, 1990). Other accounts conceptually and normatively link politics to rule based on the giving of reasons rather than deploying violence (Forst, 2017). Systematic investigations on the nature of politics have become comparatively rare in the last 40–50 years, both in political theory as well as in political science (Alexander, 2014). In fact, there are no “natural” definitions in the world for us to discover. Thus, rather than seeking to add yet another conceptual or normative definition of politics, in this paper, we make a first attempt at offering a vindication of the practice of politics by joining insights from pragmatic genealogy and radical realism in political theory.

Pragmatic genealogies focus on vindicating a (conceptual) practice, such as truth, based on the needs that it serves for human agents like us (Queloz, 2018, 2020; Williams, 2002). Pragmatic genealogies start with a fictionalized model to identify the core, functional needs that a (conceptual) practice serves and then engages in historical inquiry to connect the model to current uses of this (conceptual) practice. These models are fictionalized in terms of imagining a point in time at which the practice they seek to illuminate does not yet exist and in terms of drawing a connection between the need that arises at this point in time for the practice and the particular ways that this need has been historically met. The fictionalized element and the vindicatory intent both distinguish pragmatic genealogies from classical ones, which are more strictly historical and have a primarily critical goal (e.g., Foucault, 1977; Nietzsche, 1997). We deploy this method to investigate the conceptual practice of politics, after improving it with some insights from radical realism.

Radical realism develops the recent revival of realism in political theory in a direction which evaluates political practices and legitimation stories through investigating the power relations they contain (Prinz, 2017; Rossi, 2020). Compared to pragmatic genealogists, radical realists place a stronger emphasis on empirical evidence in political theory (Rossi & Argenton, 2020) and the contextuality of judgment (Geuss, 2016).

Our first goal in undertaking this combination is methodological. The two literatures have remained surprisingly disconnected so far, despite being both inspired by Williams (2002, 2005). Moreover, they both stand to improve their respective toolkits by joining forces. Radical realism so far has left some of its normative capacity unused by focusing on debunking rather than vindicatory genealogies (Burelli & Destri, 2021, p. 12). Conversely, pragmatic genealogies place comparatively little weight on context and empirical evidence in their functional analyses. This unduly limits their relevance, not least because they are less sensitive to the variations within the concepts being vindicated.

We draw these two literatures together by developing a unique realist pragmatic genealogy. The key theoretical move is introducing a distinction between functional need and functional mechanisms (Mahner & Bunge 2001). For example, the need for food is universal but the institutional mechanisms by which societies produce and distribute foods vary historically and geographically (Geuss, 2008, 14). In our approach, the fictionalizing element of pragmatic genealogies is instrumental in revealing the universal functional need that underpins a conceptual practice, and why we cannot do without it. However, radical realists' emphasis on looking at, for example, the actual history and ethnography of early human societies is crucial in revealing how many possible mechanisms there are to discharge the very same functional need.

Our second goal is to use this methodological contribution to clarify the confusion behind much contemporary discontent with politics which is expressed as hatred and rejection of politics. Such expressions of discontent take deficiencies of current politics in Western democracies as general flaws of this practice, and thus lose sight of its important, indeed vital, function. The realist pragmatic genealogy we offer makes visible that an important aspect underlying current rejections of politics is a mix-up between functional need for politics and the different mechanisms for discharging this need. The dissatisfaction with specific political mechanisms is certainly legitimate and at times warranted. Yet, this often escalates in a rejection of politics as such, which is dangerous given the vital need that politics discharges.

To anticipate our conclusion, the combination of elements of pragmatic genealogy and radical realism reveals that the emergence of politics as a practice is best accounted for by the need for selecting binding collective decisions. So understood, politics is an unavoidable functional need that can only be disregarded at the risk of perishing. However, and importantly, the radical realist preoccupation with empirical knowledge and contextual variance reveals that this unavoidable need can still be discharged by a variety of institutional mechanisms in different ways and with different advantages and costs. In practical terms, monarchies and aristocracies are different mechanisms to discharge the function of politics, and so are different institutional forms of democracy.

The upshot of our approach is to show that the ever-growing negativity toward politics risks losing sight of the vital need at the core of this practice. However, this does not prompt resignation: dissatisfaction with the current mechanisms of politics can and should orient us to seek new and better mechanisms to discharge this function. In other words, our argument changes the question from, for example, "Is politics necessarily corrupt?" to "What about politics can be changed and what cannot be changed?"

The argument proceeds as follows. First, we illustrate the current turn against politics by briefly reconstructing two prominent seeming rejections of politics in the public sphere: the populist and the technocratic one. Second, we outline the methodology of realist pragmatic genealogy that we will use to clarify and vindicate the practice of politics. Third, we apply our approach by showing why politics counts as a function, and how the distinction between functional need and functional mechanism helps dispel some of the confusion in debates about the nature of politics, not least in realist political theory. Finally, we conclude by going back to the societal problem of the seeming rejection of politics to argue that our approach allows us to see that discontent with specific political mechanisms may be well-grounded, but should not lead to the rejection of politics.

## 2 | TWO SEEMING REJECTIONS OF POLITICS

Politics seems increasingly under attack in Western democracies. On one side, there is a large populist rejection of the very practice of politics as intrinsically corrupted (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). To be fair, this is not a new phenomenon (Crick, 2013), but the current vehemence seems unprecedented. On the other side, liberal political thought has often been criticized for its implicit "displacement of politics" (Honig, 1993; Newey, 2001). This is an old criticism (Schmitt, 2007), too, but one that has become increasingly salient again due to the practical prevalence of technocratic decision-making, particularly in the European Union, as well as theoretical defenses of different forms of epistocracy (Bell, 2016; Brennan, 2017).<sup>1</sup>

## 2.1 | The populist rejection of politics

An illustrious example of a populist rejection of politics is General de Gaulle. In 1958 he was widely praised for rescuing France from “corrupted politicians.” Yet in 1961, he was criticized for seeking a “purely political solution” to the Algerian rebellion (Crick, 2013, p. 2). Another important historical case is Fidel Castro, who famously told a reporter, “We are not politicians. We made our revolution to get the politicians out” (Crick, 2013, p. 2).

Many contemporary examples are less illustrious but equally revealing. In Italy, the populist party “Five Star Movement” built its identity by distancing itself from professional politicians (Cozzaglio, 2020). One of its MPs, Paola Taverna, was confronted by a citizen with the seeming accusation of being a politician. She responded by repeatedly shouting back, “I am not a politician!” (La7 Attualità, 2014).

This evocative example hints at the core of the populist rejection of politics. Namely, the view that politics is inevitably a tool of the powerful elite to dominate the people through institutional constraints (Urbinati, 2019). The “true people” supposedly have little power to influence actual collective decisions. In contemporary liberal democracies, politicians are often perceived as the elite group which is opposed to the true people. As a consequence, populist movements emphasize the direct relationship between a charismatic leader and the people, and conversely criticize representative institutions (Urbinati, 2019). Populist movements push back against any liberal constraint on popular sovereignty downplaying pluralism and attacking constitutional courts (classically, Zakaria, 1997).

“Pork barrel” politics in particular is often viewed as inevitably morally corrupt. The true agents of the people should be morally pure, and this means rejecting distasteful means, abdicating personal interests, and refusing necessary compromises with other parties. The division between the people and the corrupted politicians is essential to populist approaches to politics. To the extent that real politics seems to require all these things, populism is seen as inherently disdainful of real politics (Cozzaglio, 2020).

Regardless of whether this populist rejection of politics is coherent, we think it is worth addressing for two reasons. First, it clearly has purchase with a growing part of Western electorates (Schäfer and Zürn, 2021). Second, because it raises the important question of whether this seeming rejection of politics is fundamental or only superficial.

## 2.2 | The technocratic-epistocratic rejection of politics

The second critique of politics comes from a very different part of the spectrum, from technocrats and experts who think politics is simply an obstacle to getting the right policies in place.<sup>2</sup> Supporters of this view revive the idea that politics should ideally be neutralized to the point of simply becoming administration in the hands of experts with a compass set on, for example, elusive notions of the common good or a certain measure of utility.

This line of critique emerges from the dissatisfaction with the malfunctioning of democracy. Decades of research across the social sciences variedly show the unimportance of individual votes for election outcomes, the unfitness of the typical voter to make informed decisions, the wrong incentives for career politicians, the inability of politicians to steer reliably, and, recently, how polarization leads to a frustration with politics (for a summary, see, e.g., Achen & Bartels, 2017). The view of technocrats and experts could be justified by a commitment to epistocracy, the rule of the knowledgeable which addresses this dissatisfaction, with the reintroduction of, for example, weighted voting based on level of education (Bell, 2016; Brennan, 2017; for criticisms, see, e.g., Arlen & Rossi, 2020; for a counter-proposal, see, e.g., Goodin & Spiekermann, 2018; Landemore, 2020).

This line of critique and the depoliticizing response is less rare or extreme than the example of epistocracy might lead one to suspect. According to the recent revival of realism in political theory, much liberal political theory “represents a desire to evade, displace, or escape from politics” (Galston, 2010, p. 386), not only through technocratic rule, but through judicialization or constitutionalization (Shklar, 1964), or public reason (Rawls, 1997).

Thus, both populists and technocrats seemingly reject politics. One may think that they are both quite clearly confused, and that they are not really rejecting politics per se, but some of its specific forms (e.g., liberal politics, or democratic politics). However, it is still important to dispel this confusion, clarifying both what parts of politics we can criticize and what parts we cannot do without.

### 3 | PRAGMATIC GENEALOGY IN FUNCTIONALIST KEY

To clarify this confusion, we engage in a vindication of politics by bringing together insights from pragmatic genealogy and radical realism in political theory. Pragmatic Genealogy is geared toward providing vindications of current practices or values, but it risks being exceedingly abstract despite its attempts to incorporate real historical contingencies. Radical realism is appropriately attentive to historical realities, but due to its negative-critical focus seemingly lacks the capacity to positively vindicate values and (conceptual) practices. We seek to contribute to current developments in pragmatic genealogy by showing how the reconstruction of the functional need at the core of politics' emergence is best complemented by insights from radical realist political theory about the contextual variation of the mechanisms for how such functional needs are met.

#### 3.1 | Pragmatic genealogy

Genealogies look at the history of current practices or concepts to enable us to see how they emerged through contingent processes, and eventually to evaluate them in light of our changed perspective on them. They are more often critical, debunking, and problematizing (Nietzsche, 1997; Foucault, 2020), revealing that shared assumptions are rarely as uncontroversial as they prima facie seem. For example, the distinction between private and public (Geuss, 2009), or the idea of a natural property right (Rossi & Argenton, 2020) have been recently subjected to such genealogical criticism. Critical genealogies have only limited normative potential, because they can only debunk existing norms rather than advocating specific ones (Burelli & Destri, 2021; Koopman, 2013).

Genealogies however can also be *vindictory*, providing a novel grounding for the positive role of certain human practices or concepts. Pragmatic genealogy is built on the idea that you can justify a certain concept or practice by looking at its history, which reveals why it would make sense to us to keep using it. This approach was arguably pioneered by Williams, in his book *Truth and Truthfulness* (2002) and foreshadowed by Craig (1991). Williams deploys this genealogical analysis to account for why human beings value truth. He imagines a simplified state of nature to explain why human beings value having accurate beliefs (2002, p. 41). In any environment, information is key to pinpoint both potential dangers and opportunities. Since having accurate beliefs about the world dramatically increases our individual ability to survive, there is strong selective pressure to cultivate the tendency to arrive at accurate beliefs. Having accurate information, in his view, must have played an essential role in surviving in a dangerous world, and social groups who would fail to value truth, could not have survived for long. The key innovation of Williams' approach to genealogy is that he combines imaginary elements that do not seek to track historical facts with empirical sensibility.

Subsequently, the method of pragmatic vindictory genealogy has been developed and analytically systematized, especially by Queloz. His pragmatic genealogy is motivated by the claim that “the ideas we live by can be shown to be rooted in practical needs and concerns generated by certain facts about us and our situation” (Queloz, 2021, p. 2). Pragmatic genealogies seek to gain such insights by “reverse-engineering the points of ideas, tracing them to their practical origins, and revealing what they do for us when they function well” (Queloz, 2021, p. 3). Practical origins are focused on needs but could also focus on other practical concerns and interests (Queloz, 2021). This means that instead of formulating the targets for concepts, the goal is to show what concepts did for us before we had

them (Queloz, 2021, p. 16). Adapted to the purposes of this paper, we may ask: if the concept of politics did not exist, why would we have (needed) to invent it?

For pragmatic genealogy, politics is imagined in the first instance as a conceptual practice. Such conceptual practices are understood “as a technique that renders concept-users sensitive to certain features of the world and links them in their minds with certain inferences in thought and action” (Queloz, 2021, p. 24). Pragmatic genealogies investigate such conceptual practices by focusing on three key ingredients: an “agent-centredness, [a] function-first approach, and [a] genealogical dimension” (Queloz, 2021, p. 34). These ingredients seek to combine the best naturalist explanation without reducing the point of ideas and conceptual practices to instrumental explanation (Queloz, 2021, pp. 26–28). Agent-centredness means the commitment to address a philosophical problem not by focusing on an “object X” but on “the agents and their dispositions, attitudes, concepts, and words revolving around X” (Queloz, 2021, p. 34). The function-first approach prioritizes the practical point or function of a practice over, for example, questions of its meaning. The genealogical dimension is about understanding how we got from the postulation of an abstract model of a conceptual practice to our current use of such practices and is thus key to the second of pragmatic genealogy’s two steps: “(a) it constructs models, in particular fictional prototypes of our practices; and (b) it introduces a dynamic dimension to help us understand how one gets from these prototypes to the practices we actually have” (Queloz, 2021, p. 49).

For a classical example, let us return to Williams’ genealogy in *Truth and Truthfulness* (2002). The idea there is that the practical role of truth is related to the need that agents like us have for sharing information about the environment where we live together. Rather than from an empirically informed tracing of this idea or practice, the argument relies on showing the very practical need that shaped the possible evolution of truth in light of the functional role it played. In practice, the argument relies on imagining a hypothetical situation in which the conceptual practice is absent, and on identifying what functional pressures would have led to its emergence. To political theorists, this method should not appear as too radical, as it reflects and codifies many assumptions behind classic “state of nature” arguments (Hobbes, [1651] 2009; Locke, [1689] 1967; Rousseau, [1762] 2002).

In short, such genealogies model a hypothetical starting condition to show that a specific practice would discharge a crucial social function under that condition, solving an otherwise fatal problem (Queloz, 2020). This gives us a reason in favor of keeping that practice. Obviously real historical evidence is still needed when we compare the function of the practice we model with respect to the actual practice we now have (Queloz, 2018, p. 7).

The model-building and genealogical steps of pragmatic genealogy stand in a complex, if not tension-laden relationship. The dynamic models in the first step do not aim to reconstruct “actual historical development” (Queloz, 2021, p. 14), rather to map out some of the “main practical pressures that have sculpted our conceptual practices” (2021, p. 14). At the same time, Queloz uses Nietzsche’s image of “hardening and sharpening one’s functional hypothesizing ‘under the hammerblow of historical knowledge’” (Queloz, 2021, p. 19) to illustrate the relationship between the two steps. Queloz seeks to bring together these conflicting elements through claiming that in order to see what concepts do for us we need to “zoom out to bring into view the broader patterns and purposes of human behavior and the weave of life in which they are embedded.” Doing so will show us “what the context in which we put our concepts to use is actually like, and how this renders it more useful to operate with certain concepts rather than others” (Queloz, 2021, p. 30). However, such claims mainly seem to reinforce the importance of actual history rather than vindicate the use of fictional models. This potentially conflicting relationship between historicizing and fictionalizing steps in pragmatic genealogies has thus far remained unresolved. We shall argue here that this relationship can be improved through our own modification of pragmatic genealogy with the help of radical realism.

Pragmatic genealogy would seem *prima facie* compatible with realist forms of political theorizing in view of its three basic ingredients. The agent-centeredness reflects realist preoccupation with actual political actors, with all their interests and flaws, rather than on purely disembodied ideas and values (Philp, 2010). The function first element echoes realist interest in the nature of politics (Sleat, 2014b), its point and purpose (Rossi, 2012; Sangiovanni, 2008), and even explicitly its function (Burelli, 2020). Finally, the genealogical dimension has been influentially adopted by radical realists, as an efficacious tool to disarm moralist distortions (Aytaç & Rossi, 2022; Prinz & Raekstad, 2020;

Prinz & Rossi, 2017). However, there remain questions about the compatibility of pragmatic genealogy with radical realism because of the elements of idealization involved in the fictional component (Queloz, 2021, p. 50).

Even the pioneer of pragmatic genealogy, Bernard Williams, admits that this is a form of “imaginary genealogy” (Williams, 2002, p. 34), that to a certain degree detaches itself from the emphasis on the empirical typical of earlier conceptions of genealogy (Kail, 2021). In imaginary genealogies, an argument works by investigating how a certain practice “might be imagined to have come about” (Williams, 2002, p. 20). This methodology may call to mind Nozick’s model of “invisible hand explanation” (Nozick, 1974, p. 18), an author who arguably serves as a clear example of unrealistic political theory. But not all forms of imaginary theorizing as fictional modeling are equally unrealistic. This depends on the forms of idealization used to get to the models. Take the difference between what we identify as two forms of idealization as an example, namely idealization as mere abstraction that selects only relevant elements of reality for the model to reduce complexity and idealization as distortion which involves changing elements of reality to make them fit for inclusion in the model. While idealization as abstraction might be compatible with radical realist commitments, idealization as distortion would not.

So while we agree with pragmatic genealogists that one needs a mixture of historicizing and fictionalizing elements, the key to their successful connection still has to be delivered. After all, even friendly critics of pragmatic genealogy only ever endorsed either the fictionalizing or the historicizing element, but not both (Queloz, 2021, 49). We now turn to the distinction between a functional need and functional mechanism in order to clarify how and why fictionalizing and historicizing both matter for pragmatic genealogy.

### 3.2 | Fictionalizing models of needs, historicizing mechanisms

To understand the difference between needs and mechanisms, we draw on an important distinction in the functionalist literature.<sup>3</sup> Functions connect two different yet related aspects: (1) a functional need, for example, the pumping of blood and (2) the mechanism that performs it, for example, the actual valves of the heart that do the pumping (Mahner & Bunge, 2001).

First, functions involve systemic needs, that reflect the “proper working” (Hempel, 1965) of a certain system. In other words: “to ascribe a function to something is to ascribe a capacity to it which is singled out by its role in an analysis of some capacity of a containing system” (Cummins, 1975). In this sense, functions are specific behaviors performed within a certain class of systems, be it natural, artificial, or social. There are many examples of functional needs: the beating of the heart in mammals, the acceleration in a vehicle, and the revenue gathering in a political institution. These are all things the relative systems need in order to persist. Functions in this sense are immaterial and refer to a certain kind of behavior that plays a crucial role within complex systems. They are a representation of systemic needs, which always play a self-selective role in the organism. In other words, if the functional need is not acted upon, or responded to badly, the system won’t stick around for long (Millikan, 1989). If the heart stops pumping blood, the mammal dies. If the engine cannot be throttled, the vehicle is uncontrollable. If a certain political institution cannot raise revenues, it will crash.

A second related aspect of functions is the specific mechanism that discharges the required need. Functions can denote the valve of the heart that pumps the blood, the pedal that controls how much gas is released in a vehicle, or a certain form of institutionalized tax collection. In this sense, functions are material and involve specific causal mechanisms.

An interesting consequence of this distinction is that it is not a biconditional. First, the same mechanism can discharge different needs. For example, the heart’s valve (m) energizes the organism through distributing oxygen (n1), but it also modulates blood pressure relatively to the activity the body is performing (n2). Both needs are important enough to explain why hearts were selected for. Without either, a mammal will not survive. Both these needs are discharged by the same mechanism: the heart’s valves. Second, a certain process can be performed by different

physical mechanisms. For example, blood pumping (n) can be achieved through the natural heart (m1), or through an artificial pump (m2). Alternative mechanisms may be better or worse at performing this process.

Social examples are harder to work out with precision, as the context is obviously much more complex. However, distinguishing *social* needs and mechanisms is not impossible, and in principle the same distinction applies.<sup>4</sup> For example, we can say that an army (m) protects a group from external interference (n1), but it also insulates political power against internal revolutions (n2). Armies have historically discharged both needs, and the institutional mechanism of armies has proved crucial in states' survival through times. The reverse relationship between needs and mechanisms also works: "pattern maintenance" (Parsons, 1991), that is, socialization in the same system of values (n), may be performed by different institutions, such as the family (m1), religious rituals (m2), or public schools (m3). The different mechanisms may coexist and reinforce each other in their process, or they can be mutually exclusive functional alternatives.

This distinction between need and mechanism clarifies the division of labor between historicizing and fictionalizing elements in pragmatic genealogy, and makes it more realistic. The functional need has a universal element—it must be satisfied by any (social) system if this system is to survive. This universal element of the functional need lends itself to the fictionalizing model building of pragmatic genealogy. At a high level of abstraction and universalization, the most fitting model of the need can be constructed. Mechanisms for meeting the functional need instead can vary a lot, and allow a degree of choice among functional alternatives. For example, all states need institutional mechanisms for revenue gathering but these can range from taxation to control over natural resources or state-owned enterprise. Another example is the functional need for human beings (in a non-clinical environment) to eat. This need is universal. However, the mechanisms vary even if all of these mechanisms contain an element of consuming food. Possibly an easier image for getting this point across is to consider how hunger should be understood both in terms of basic functions and contextual mechanisms. Hunger is namely as connected to universal functional needs that human beings have as to the specific institutional mechanisms for producing food and distributing it (Geuss, 2008, p. 5). While hunger might be the signal that indicates a universal need, the social norms that establish what counts as food (Borghini et al., 2021) vary both historically and geographically and may affect how the universal need is experienced and addressed.

The distinction between functional need and mechanism marks the most substantial improvement our approach offers in comparison to current pragmatic genealogy, for example, as practiced by Queloz. In Queloz's version of pragmatic genealogy, mechanisms only matter to understand how the conceptual proto practice might arise at the model building stage, not how the current practice differs in meeting the (adapted and less generic) need today. By giving mechanisms a more prominent place in our pragmatic genealogy, we seek to strengthen the more realistic historicizing elements in pragmatic genealogy and thereby come to a more even balance with fictional modeling elements. In short, the distinction between functional need and mechanism we introduce clarifies how mechanisms matter for the historicization of fictional models of conceptual practices.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4 | VINDICATING POLITICS VIA PRAGMATIC GENEALOGY

After having introduced our realist and pragmatic genealogy, we turn to applying it to vindicate the practice of politics. The backdrop, against which we will develop this vindication, will be Bernard Williams' thoughts on the nature of politics and legitimacy. Williams is an ideal starting point, because he is both a classic reference point of pragmatic genealogy, and has also, in his late work, offered an influential realist discussion of politics. Consistent with pragmatic genealogy, Williams' argument is that politics is an unavoidable human need (he indirectly seeks to defend). We first reconstruct Williams' account (and defense) of politics and then seek to show that Williams' focus on legitimacy leads to difficulty with distinguishing between the fundamental functional need for politics and the different functional mechanisms, through which this functional need can be discharged (4.1). To overcome this difficulty, we will then spell out in more detail how to apply the idea of functional needs to a vindicatory genealogy of



politics (4.2). Finally, we spell out what role mechanisms could play in a pragmatic genealogy of politics and summarize the differences between Williams' and our approach (4.3).

## 4.1 | Politics in Williams

Williams' realist thought on legitimacy and legitimation has served as a cornerstone of debates in political theory about the delimitation of politics (e.g., Cozzaglio & Greene, 2019; Cross, 2020; Forrester, 2012; Freedon, 2012; Hall, 2015; Jubb, 2015; Prinz, 2022; Sagar, 2018; Sleat, 2013, 2014b). More important still, his legitimacy-focused account of politics is an example of a widely used conceptualization of politics.

Williams (2005) complains that political theory focuses too much on justice and instead needs to focus more on politics. Focusing on politics means worrying about how much both our real political institutions and the ideal ones philosophers advocate can satisfy the “first political question”—namely, the “securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation” (3). He does not elaborate much on this point, but he has in mind the common Hobbesian intuition that life for individuals outside of political institutions is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” ([1651] 1951, Chapter XIII). Without some institution to regulate and mediate social interactions, cooperation would break down and we would not be able to achieve anything that we might want.

Williams subscribes to the broader realist intuition that the first political question cannot be discharged by coercion alone, but requires cultivating legitimacy beliefs among the people. As Max Weber (1978) famously observed, ruling without legitimacy would be too costly and inefficient, as all agents will routinely question whether this or that specific law is supported by enough coercion to warrant self-interested compliance. Hence, political institutions need to cultivate a more robust axiological attachment among their citizens if they want to persist (Satkunanandan, 2014), and political leaders can only stay in power by upholding the values of their subjects (Cozzaglio & Greene, 2019; Cross, 2022). As Rousseau ([1762] 2002) emphatically stated: “the strongest man is never strong enough to be always master, unless he transforms his power into right, and obedience into duty” (p. 158). Thus, political institutions for Williams only work when they “make sense” to the people living under them as “an example of authoritative order” (Williams, 2005, pp. 10, 11). More practically, to make sense in that way requires those legitimating their power to meet two conditions. First, to establish a political relationship by offering a story in support of legitimacy to all they seek to rule—that is, not simply to coerce its people but to advance a legitimacy claim; and second, for this claim to be widely believed and found justifiable in light of the shared values of that community, at least by the majority even though it might not be believed by all (Cross, 2020). Williams recognizes that the content of the legitimation stories that will find sufficient support will vary contextually. In the context of modernity, this excludes legitimations based on, for example, the enslavement of others (2005, pp. 9–12). He also acknowledges that regimes will be imperfectly legitimated, which means that there is some degree of successful domination involved (see, e.g., Cozzaglio & Greene, 2019; Sleat, 2014a).

Instead of offering yet another detailed re-interpretation of Williams' theory, we propose to construct a genealogical vindication of the practice of politics, using Williams' theory as our backdrop. We read Williams as trying to offer a conceptual stipulation of the basic structure of politics close to the fictional modeling of pragmatic genealogy. If put in the language of our revised approach to pragmatic genealogy outlined above, Williams' claims about the conceptual nature of politics appear to spell out the functional need that politics shall meet (“securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation” by “establishing a political relationship” [Williams, 2005, p. 3]). The remainder of his discussion of politics focuses on which legitimation stories can win sufficient support. This question is best settled contextually and is concerned with the mechanisms to meet the functional need. In other words, for Williams, legitimacy is at the core of the functional need for (modern) politics. Different legitimation stories may have different levels of success but there is no politics without the logic of legitimacy. Williams' focus on the logic of legitimacy being inextricably bound to the practice of politics leads him to conflate the specific mechanism through which the functional need of politics is (sometimes) addressed with the functional need itself.

Recall that we set out to look for a vindication of politics that could clarify current seeming rejections of politics. A key consequence of Williams' conflation is that his account does not help us with contemporary problems such as the questioning of the value and seeming rejection of politics *per se*, because on his account a rejection of the mechanism of legitimation means a rejection of politics. We can recognize this consequence due to the distinction between functional needs and functional mechanisms introduced above. To overcome this limitation of Williams' conceptual stipulation and potential vindication of politics, our vindication needs to not only allow seeing legitimacy as only one type of mechanism through which the functional need of politics can be addressed, it also needs to individuate the functional need for politics.<sup>6</sup>

## 4.2 | Specifying the functional need for politics

Pragmatic genealogy can illustrate why any social group, when it becomes large and complex enough, develops a natural need of politics, understood as binding collective decision-making. Large groups cannot possibly act to address internal and external crises without political institutions, and small groups have little chance to survive competition against large groups (Turchin, 2003). Our initial assumptions are that human beings are neither individually self-sufficient (even in family units) nor do they naturally fit into serving a communal purpose (there is always, at least potentially, space for disagreement, if only because no rulers can fully subdue all of their subjects). We also assume that any social group is recurrently threatened by internal and external crises that require organized collective action to be defused. If these assumptions stand, politics can at base be understood as the vital function of securing binding collective decisions despite disagreement about what these should be, because groups that are unable to secure binding collective decisions are bound to wither away.

Imagine, then, a group of people that lacks politics, that is, that lacks a recognized authoritative way to reach collective decisions binding on (almost) every member of our group. Agents in such a group will have different preferences, interests and values, and as such they will have different ideas about what the group should do. Today, this is not particularly controversial, because the "fact of pluralism" (Rawls, 1993) has become an almost ubiquitous assumption in political theory. Any large human group is bound to have a wide diversity in claims about how we should live together, be they based on different values and/or on contrasting interests (Burelli, 2021). The claim, in a nutshell, is that absent politics, such pluralism would be highly dysfunctional, because it will threaten the survival not only of the social group but also of individual agents.

Let us see why this is the case. Imagine a group of agents who cannot agree on any system to select and issue binding collective decisions. Such a social group will face recurrent internal and external crises. The paradigmatic case of external crisis is foreign aggression<sup>7</sup>: some agent from outside the group may seek either to dominate it directly, or simply to appropriate some vital food source that the group currently controls. Threatened by an attack, a social group can only survive by coordinating a response. A faction of the group may prefer fleeing. They may judge the enemy too strong or they might fear for their individual survival in the ensuing battle. Maybe this faction does not care too much about the specific food source contested by the enemy, perhaps they are optimistic about finding new and better options elsewhere by moving. Another faction of the group may prefer to engage the enemy directly, either because they may think them to be a trifling menace, or because they cherish confrontation and the chance to impose on others. They may even be pessimistic about their chances, but considering that the food resources cannot be found elsewhere, they understand that fleeing would mean certain death.

This macro decision between fighting and fleeing is only the tip of the iceberg, because each choice opens up a plethora of other sub-choices, each vital and each threatening to splinter the group. If the group chooses to flee, they need to decide where to go, where there are fewer threats and possibly access to vital food sources, as well as how to organize the travel there. If the group chooses to fight, they still need to decide where and when to engage the enemy, who will face the enemy in the front line, as well as how the battle should be organized. Regardless of which

choice and sub-choices the group ends up making, it is crucial that most commit to it. Otherwise, the group will splinter, and likely wither away.

Many crises are also internal, resulting sometimes from uncontrollable factors like the emergence of a pandemic or the advent of an earthquake. Other internal crises are human made, and may range from terrorist attacks to economic crises. Any of these social threats require coordinated responses to be defused, be they relief strategies after the fact or preventive measure based on risk assessment. What won't do is (advocating) that agents deal with such challenges individually.

Of course, one can imagine a future in which each individual lives on their own island, in a perfectly autonomous technological paradise. Such individuals might have no need for politics, as they do not interact with one another (thus conflicting), and technology magically solves all their problems. Or perhaps one can imagine a different future, in which people all easily and spontaneously converge on the common good unanimously, like bees or ants, even when this requires dramatic individual sacrifice. Both imaginary cases are so far removed from the common experience that they cannot even be recognized as properly human.

The important takeaway is that due to diversity of beliefs, interests and values, unanimous convergence on a specific course of action among agents is not to be expected in any sufficiently large group. However, since effective action of such groups requires that people commit to a decision, an institutional mechanism that authoritatively selects collective decisions and makes them binding for all is necessary. It is this need which gives disagreements their crucial importance (Waldron, 1999, pp. 102, 103; Rodríguez-Alcázar, 2017).

In this sense, politics discharges a crucial systemic need, because without it the system (i.e., the social group) cannot survive in its environment. Politics in this way appears to be a “proper function” (Burelli, 2020; Millikan, 1989), because it is a behavioral disposition that made our political institution survive despite crises and competitive pressures. We now turn to the final step of our pragmatic genealogy of politics, connecting this understanding of functional need of politics with mechanisms for discharging it.

### 4.3 | Bringing mechanisms into a pragmatic genealogy of politics

The advantage of a pragmatic genealogy relying on abstract, fictionalizing modeling is that it can vividly visualize how the need for politics is ubiquitous. Yet, as we argued above, this fictionalizing modeling must be complemented with a more realistic attention to empirical investigations, to carry a more nuanced recommendation of the available mechanism to discharge said needs. Historical and anthropological evidence is crucial to avoid the risk that the “fictionalizing” elements essentialize needs and yield a deterministic functional analysis. In this sub-section, we will briefly outline the key issues relating to mechanisms for meeting the functional need for politics, as well as the relationship between these mechanisms and the functional need. This will further clarify the difference between Williams' and our approach to vindicating politics.

Just like the need to pump blood can be discharged by a natural heart or by an artificial pump, so can the need to issue binding collective decisions be discharged through different mechanisms. Various forms of government (monarchies, democracies, and oligarchies) are different mechanisms to discharge this very same need. As Huntington provocatively observed: “The most important political distinction among countries concerns not their form of government but their degree of government” (Huntington, 2006, p. 1), that is, whether their political institutions are functional. The United States and the Soviet Union are more like each other, than they are like modernizing countries which lack functional political institutions, precisely because when the president or the politburo makes a decision, there is a high probability that it will be “implemented through government machinery” (Huntington, 2006). Different institutional forms of democracy, such as representative or direct, also count as varied mechanisms of politics. The logic of legitimacy will matter to varying extent in these mechanisms.

Similarly, the functional need for politics cannot be clarified without invoking specific political mechanisms that might be involved in its discharging. For example, Williams (2005) conceives of the first political question as “the

securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation" (3). This demand is universal, being required literally "all the time," and yet its answer is also always contextual, depending on "historical circumstances" (3). This is why the "fictionalizing" element of "imaginary" vindictory genealogy is not enough. Rather, it always needs to be connected with a careful empirical analysis, which explores what variance is supported in discharging the required function, and what hard constraints there are that will make any proposed reform dysfunctional if violated. In other words, you can feed a population with cows or cats, and through capitalist production or property-owning democracy (with various degrees of functionality), yet you cannot feed it on stones. Similarly, you can think that majoritarian democracy, or a proportionally representative one, can discharge the political need (with various degrees of functionality), yet unanimous decision-making cannot reliably protect any social group in times of crises.<sup>8</sup>

While it is reasonable to criticize any institutional form of politics for a variety of reasons, our analysis reveals that these criticisms must be aimed at mechanisms rather than at the functional need for politics. As problematic as the mechanisms may seem, meeting the need for politics requires that one or more mechanisms be adopted. In other words, regardless of how problematic one mechanism may appear, it cannot be abandoned or reformed unless another mechanism is available to discharge the political function.

This sub-conclusion allows us to specify the key difference between our vindication of politics and Williams'. Williams conflates the function and mechanisms of politics. The logic of legitimacy is only one mechanism for meeting this fundamental functional need. Legitimation is a specific mechanism through which the actual functional need for politics, for the making of binding collective decisions, is addressed. This function, however, can be met without necessarily using legitimation, even in modernity. Our approach thus allows us to vindicate politics in a more basic way than Williams which can capture a wider range of potential mechanisms to address the functional need for politics and to develop criteria for assessing which mechanisms are most suitable to discharge it in the current context.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

Our paper introduced a novel realist pragmatic genealogy, based on a careful distinction between functional need and functional mechanisms. In so doing, it fruitfully connects two literatures inspired by Bernard Williams which have so far remained surprisingly disconnected: pragmatic genealogy and political realism. The resulting approach improves both strands. With respect to radical realism, we are able to provide a vindictory genealogy, as opposed to the critical ones which remain dominant within this approach. With respect to pragmatic genealogy, we clarify what is at stake in the tension between its fictionalizing and historicizing elements. On our approach both elements play a key, but distinct, role in a pre-assigned division of labor: fictional modeling reveals the need, while historicizing, empirically-grounded analysis reveals contextually variant mechanisms.

We then deployed this realist pragmatic genealogy to vindicate the practice of politics, currently seemingly being rejected by both populists and technocrats. Our approach shows how such rejections are confused, as they mistake the legitimate disdain with specific political mechanisms for a rejection of the whole practice, ignoring the important and indeed vital need that such a practice serves. Moreover, our analysis shows that the practice of politics is open to revision, in as far as criticisms of specific mechanisms are possible. However, such criticisms face the unchanging need to specify the alternative mechanisms through which the functional need of issuing binding collective decisions can be discharged.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> We cannot do full justice to the complexity of the phenomena of, and the literatures on, populism and technocracy here. Our focus is only on how they exemplify two forms of the seeming rejection of politics.
- <sup>2</sup> We do not, however, want to claim that there could be no overlaps between the conditions that have led to the rise of populists and technocrats or that their agendas, are entirely incompatible, as for example, suggested by Bickerton and Accetti (2021) under the label of technopopulism.
- <sup>3</sup> While functionalism was a historically influential paradigm in the social (Parsons, 1991) and political sciences (Easton, 1953), it has been famously criticized on epistemological grounds (Elster, 1982). Recently, however, there have been attempts to rescue functional explanations in the social world (Pettit, 1996). While some still prefer thinking of social functions in instrumental terms (Little, 2020), functions have been thought to be identifiable in more objective terms, by both systemic accounts (Cummins, 1975), as well as etiological ones (Millikan, 1989; Neander, 1999). The literature on functions and functional explanations is long and varied. Thus, we cannot entirely summarize it here. Recent reviews can be found in McLaughlin (2001) and Hufendiek et al. (2020). For a recent exploration of the connection between functionalism and political realism, see Burelli (2020).
- <sup>4</sup> See Kincaid (2020) for a precise operationalization of proper function, which is amenable to empirical investigations of social phenomena.
- <sup>5</sup> Another element which sets our version of pragmatic genealogy apart from Queloz's is our limitation of fictional modeling to forms of idealization as abstraction rather than relying on idealization as distortion. Queloz's discussion of the emergence of the practice of "money" (2021, pp. 15, 16) shall suffice as a brief example. While Queloz acknowledges that fictionalization of the emergence of the practice of money, which is focused on the limitations of barter, needs to be "de-idealized" (2021, p. 16), his account of money features idealization as distortion, in as far as it not only abstracts from the details of historical practices but distorts some crucial power relations at play even in the abstracted account of the emergence of money (for example, as noted by a range of sociological and anthropological accounts of the emergence of money, Ingham, 2004). Our use of fictional modeling with regard to the practice of politics seeks to refrain from including distortive assumptions and thus remains compatible with our commitment to realist political theory.
- <sup>6</sup> It is at least conceivable (and historical examples also suggest) that this need can be addressed through different mechanisms that do not necessarily involve legitimacy at all.
- <sup>7</sup> Indeed "fear of enemies" (Evrigenis, 2007) can solve many collective actions problems.
- <sup>8</sup> Our argument does not entail an endorsement of a strong political naturalism (Cross, 2018; Rossi, 2010). Our argument sits orthogonally to the distinction between naturalism and voluntarism. Even if the need for politics is natural, the mechanisms to meet it can vary in terms of their naturalness or artificiality, for example, the pumping of blood is a natural need but mechanisms can be natural (the human organ) or artificial (a mechanical pump).

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