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Political Feasibility: An Interpretive Approach

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Abstract

Political theorists study the meaning of political feasibility in part to better understand the role of empirical political science in normative political theory. In the conventional understanding, political feasibility refers to the ability of an individual or collective agent to bring about a certain political state of affairs. This way of thinking about political feasibility corresponds with the ordinary language use of the term, but it asks empirical political science to carry the very heavy burden of assessing the likelihood that a plan of action will bring about a particular future state of affairs. In this article, I develop a different way to think about political feasibility as part of a conversation about the meaning of the future. Building on Gadamer's view of historical interpretation, I argue that empirical political science can be understood as creating a "history of effects" towards possible futures as a way to enable understanding of future meanings. I use this framework to examine the place of arguments about feasibility in the processes of reason giving that take place in the public sphere.

Keywords

Political feasibility, Gadamer, interpretive social science, fusion of horizons, the public sphere

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> For in so far as we can direct the future at all, we shall do it by laying what we see against what other people see. Walter Lippmann (1914, xxi)

The careful parsing out of the different meanings of political feasibility is part of the debate between moralist and realist orientations to politics (Cozzaglio & Favara, 2022; Erman & Möller, 2015; Sleat, 2016; Zuolo, 2024). One of the meanings of being realistic for political realists is the taking into account of what is politically feasible in determining the right course of action. In this article, I am exploring one dimension of political feasibility that this debate brings to the fore: the question of the normative authority of social scientific knowledge in the context of planning.

Most of the studies of political feasibility examine this concept with the toolkit of what can be broadly described as the analytic tradition in philosophy. I include in this tradition works that study feasibility by analytically distinguishing the normative authority of "ought" statements from the epistemological authority of social scientific knowledge. For the analytic conception of feasibility, the future consists of a series of discrete possibilities, each of which can be described as a "political state of affairs" (Gilabert & Lawford-Smith, 2012, p. 812). The actions of people, individually and collectively, have the potential to bring about particular future states of affairs. Since the future depends on the actions that we take, forward looking activity requires that we orient our actions towards more desirable alternatives. In this view, planning can be analytically separated into two steps: the first is posing a goal (in some versions, an ideal), and the second is the empirical assessment of whether this goal can be achieved (hence is feasible). Therefore, we need to assess each possible political state of the affairs and determine if it is desirable, and then understand which course of action can bring about each such state and in what likelihood. Having this information can allow us to be effective in orienting ourselves towards political states of affair that we find desirable and avoiding those that we do not find desirable. This conceptual set-up brings forth a central question, whether "ought implies can," that is, whether the assessment of the feasibility of a certain goal should reflect back on its desirability thus making less feasible ideal less desirable (Cross, 2024; Gilabert & Lawford-Smith, 2012, p. 818; Gheaus, 2013, p. 449; Southwood, 2016, 2018).

The purpose of this article is to think about political feasibility from a different perspective by using the toolkit of the interpretive tradition in political philosophy. Thinking about the meaning of political feasibility with this toolkit forces us to take into account the way the horizons through which we interpret political reality are themselves in constant change. This means that even if we could predict with certainty that some action will bring about a particular "political state of affairs," which in the analytical account makes it feasible, we still have to recognize that we will understand the meaning of this state of affairs against horizons that are different from our current ones. To put it differently, we need to make a distinction between the feasibility of certain objective characteristics of a future political state of affairs and the feasibility of the intersubjective meaning we project into it.

But why do we need to consider the feasibility of the objective characteristics separately from the feasibility of a certain meaning. Why can't we simply say that a full description of a political state of affairs must include both its objective characteristics and their meanings, and that once we settle on a tentative state of affairs as a goal, the question of its feasibility is still analytically separate from its desirability?

The entire article is an attempt to provide an answer to this question, but let me introduce the gist of it here. I argue that the assessment of the feasibility of a future meaning is qualitatively different from a prediction about the likelihood of any objective properties of a future state of affairs. The reason is that an assessment from a first-person perspective of the feasibility of a future meaning requires a prediction which is in part empirical and in part normative. It is a prediction about what our future selves *would* value, a prediction that presupposes some deliberation about what our future selves *should* value. The two kinds of feasibility assessments involve not only two different types of social science but also two different modes of division of labor between social science and the public sphere.

The interpretative framework of conceptualizing feasibility allows us to think about the unique meaning of political feasibility, that is, the feasibility of projects that require acting in concert. Within the analytic framework, questions about the feasibility of collective agency are conceptualized as being conditional on the actions and motivations of individual agents (Lawford-Smith, 2012; Stemplowska, 2016). In this sense, the analytic tradition understands political feasibility as a species of a more general conception of feasibility. Political feasibility is the analysis of the political constraints that agents are facing in meeting their goals, in the same way that engineers are facing questions of technical feasibility in regard to constraints related to the materials they are using. What is missing from this way of thinking about feasibility is the intersubjective dimension of collective agency, the horizons of meanings through which we understand our motivations, actions, goals, and priorities. From the normative perspective of democratic legitimacy, political constraints should be understood differently from other types of constraints (Räikkä, 2014, pp. 1–12, 2015). In a democratic society, political constraints --- the actions, reasons, and motivations of others --- have a dual character: they can be viewed as either an external constraint on the realization of a shared goal, or as an indication of a limit of the goal itself.

In what follows, I develop the interpretive view of political feasibility in three steps. I first examine the case of an individual person who engages in a conversation with her future self about the feasibility of the meaning of her future goals. I argue that such conversations can be viewed as a form of historical interpretation and that the hermeneutic approach of Hans-Georg Gadamer can help us understand the properties of these conversations and the role of social science in them. Then, I move from the "I" to the "we," that is from the study of the conversation an of an individual person with her future self to the study of processes of reason giving that take place in the public sphere. I argue that the Gadamerian framework can allow us to understand the unique features of political feasibility as arguments that are made in the context of acting together. Finally, I explore the relationship between how we think about feasibility and how we think about social science.

Feasibility and Historical Interpretation

This section argues that it is useful to apply Gadamer's philosophy of understanding for the question of the interpretation of the feasibility of future meaningful outcomes. I then argue that the assessment of the feasibility of a meaningful outcome emerges in the context of a hypothetical conversation with an imagined future self, a conversation that can be understood as a kind of historical interpretation. My plan is to examine in this section the role of feasibility in a conversation of a singular self, an "I," with her future. In the next section, I will argue that we need to understand

political feasibility in the context of a conversation between a corporate self, a "we," with its future self.

Let us begin with the case of an individual. Imagine a young person who wants to become a doctor to achieve some goals she has: helping other people, becoming rich, gaining social prestige, or any other goal. Now, this person faces the question of the feasibility of the objective outcome of becoming a doctor. Does she have good enough grades to be admitted? Would she be able to pay the tuition? Would she faint upon seeing blood? The answer to these questions will take the form of a probability function. Given this person's grades, family income, or medical history, it is possible to calculate the likelihood that she will be able to complete medical school, pass the exams, and find employment. The decision of whether medical school is a feasible route will depend on the actual probabilities compared to the probabilities of other life choices as well as her risk tolerance.

But there is also another question, which I contend is also a question of feasibility. The question is whether the outcome will have the meaning that she wants it to have. The challenge is that the person that will experience the outcome of the choice, her future self, might look at things differently and the things that are important to the younger self would be different from the one that will be valued by the older one. Perhaps in a decade she would come to see the desire to help people as a youthful naivity or would come to the conclusion that the prestige of being a doctor does not justify the long working hours. Or perhaps in a decade she would love her job for precisely the reasons her younger self chose to pursue this career. Obviously, this person's views might continue to change over time. It is possible that within a decade this person will deride the choices her younger self made but in two decades she will change her mind again and come to think that these were good choices.

It is important to emphasize that the future self does not have any epistemic or normative superiority. It is not the case that the older person knows what was right. The point is that the future self has different horizons than those of the present self and that it is the future self that will end up evaluating the decisions of the present self.

In what follows, I argue that the problem of establishing the feasibility of a certain meaning of a future outcome can be understood as a problem of historical interpretation, and that Gadamer's understanding of historical interpretation can help us to think about the role of social science in evaluating feasibility.

For Gadamer, understanding has the structure of a conversation. When we try to understand someone else's point of view, we ask them questions to try to understand where they are coming from, what is the horizon against which they assign meaning. In turn, they are asking us questions prompting ask to clarify what motivates us. Gadamer famously describes what happens in such a conversation, and by extension the philosophical meaning of the activity of interpretation, as a "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer, 2004, pp. 305, 360).

The problem of historical hermeneutic is that what we try to understand is an object, a historical artifact, that cannot engage in a conversation. The challenge, or the "task" of historical interpretation is to bring the old text "out of the alienation it which it finds itself and into the living present of conversation, which is always fundamentally realized in question and answer" (p. 362). The

way to bring a text into a conversation is not by erasing any historical distance between the text and us, the interpreters. We do not enter a conversation with the text by expecting it to be part of the conversations that we have. Instead, "[t]he task of historical understanding also involves acquiring an appropriate historical horizons, so that what we are trying to understand can be seen in its true dimensions" (p. 302, also p. 367).

Gadamer argues that the activity of interpretation presupposes that the interpreter and the text share some common background or common assumptions, that there is some "bond" that connects the interpreter and the context of the text that is interpreted (p. 295). While it is possible and sometimes common to interpret a historical text as if it is our contemporary and assume that it shares our own horizons, for Gadamer this approach to interpretation overlooks the historical dimension of the text. A historical interpretation is one that recognizes that we share a common background with the text but also that it was written with background assumptions that are possibly different from our own. Interpretation for Gadamer takes place "in the play between the traditionary text's strangeness and familiarity to us, between being a historically intended, distance object and belonging to a tradition. The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between" (p. 295). As I indicated in the beginning, I argue that the same applies to the "true locus" of political feasibility.

I want to return now the young person I discussed above who is trying to figure out if what she sees as an ideal now will still be the same in the future. We can understand her problem as one of historical interpretation and her situation as one that requires a conversation with her future self. The challenge of a conversation with the future is in some ways similar to that of a conversation with the past. In both cases, the interpretation has to appreciate the historical distance that makes the horizons of the thing that is interpreted different from the horizons of the interpreter. Our young person has to acquire "an appropriate historical horizons" so that what she is "trying to understand can be seen in its true dimensions." To do so, she has to be able to place herself in the "in-between" between her present self and her future self. She has to be able to envision a future in which she holds a different system of beliefs while at the same time not holding these beliefs.

There is obviously a world of difference between the interpretation of the past and the interpretation of the future. The interpretation of the past is aimed at seeing something that has already happened in its true dimensions. The conversation is with a historical objective artifact which brings into language the beliefs of actual historical people. The process of interpretation is an attempt to move this historical artifact out of its alienation into a metaphorical living conversation. The conversation with a future self is hypothetical. It is a conversation with a future that does not exist and may never exist.

But if we already conceded that assessing the feasibility of a particular meaning of future outcome requires a fictional conversation, then why does it matter if the meaning this outcome is actually feasible? Why can't we engage in a conversation with different imaginary worlds as a way to reflect on our own system of beliefs. Would it be different if our young person engages in a "conversation" with her future self or instead with a fictional character in a novel or in a TV series about a hospital?

I argue that looking at a conversation with the future self as a process of reaching understanding can help us articulate the difference. To gain understanding, one needs to be able to capture both

the background that is shared with the partner to conversation and the way in which they are different. A conversation with the past requires the turning of a historical artifact from an alienated object into a "living present." A conversation with the future requires the opposite move. It requires the interpreter to alienate herself into an object. This, to return to Gadamer's framework, is needed to be able to create the real historical distance that is needed so evaluate the true proportions of the future self. To do so, that is, to be able to assess whether a certain vision for the future is feasible, she has to be able to tell a plausible story about how her present-self became her future-self. The plausibility of the story is what makes a certain meaning of the future feasible (Gadamer describes this process as tracing the "history of effects").

Thus, for one to be able to engage in a conversation with her future self she would need to tell a plausible story about her own transformation. This will require her to turn herself into an object of analysis and examine the causes that are likely to turn her into a future self with different horizons. Once again, the criterion for a successful analysis is not the ability to predict the future accurately but the ability to turn herself into an object, that is to accurately understand how her own horizons are shaped at least in part by her context. To understand what is feasible for her to become, she has to understand how she became who she is and how her present self can become her future one.

Towards a Conception of Political Feasibility

In the previous section, I have argued that the process of assessing the feasibility of a certain meaning of a future outcome can be conceptualized as a species of historical understanding. But, while the understanding of the past requires the interpreter to metaphorically turn a historical object into a subject who can be a conversation partner, the understanding of the future requires her to do the opposite, to view herself or the values that she holds as an object that can be moved by external forces. This "moment" of self-objectification is an acknowledgment of two facets of our historical being: that the things we value are dependent on our position, and that our position changes over time.

In this section, I examine how these moments of self-objectification play out in the context of assessing political feasibility. In these contexts, the question of which horizons of meaning are feasible presents itself to a group, a "we," rather than an "I." In this case, we are not looking at the internal deliberation of an individual but at the exchange of reasons among people who understand themselves as belonging to a group. As I argue below, the context of deliberation brings forth the tensions between unity and plurality. A reflection about what kind of changes are feasible for "us" requires participants to assess how they can change, how others can change, and how they can change together. As part of this dialogical process of reflection, they need to objectify both themselves and others (Gilabert [2017] argues for the importance of reflective deliberation in discussion about feasibility does not expand on the characteristics of the "we" who are deliberating).

Planning, whether done in public or in private, can trigger a reflection on the question of what we value and why. The process of planning requires us to consider alternatives which cannot always be compared using simple scales. If one course of action brings about more hospitals and another one more schools, or if one brings about more freedom and the other more security, there is no simple way to assess which one should be more valued. The comparison of these options pushes planners to reflect on the broader context of the decision, which often involves reflection on the

broader terms of their cooperation. We understand the terms of social cooperation in the context of broader projects that are by their very nature future oriented. They are not just about the terms of cooperation here and now but also about how they fit within broader trajectories. The public sphere – the sphere in which people give reasons to each other in the process of carrying out shared projects – is the site where these projects engage each (Boswell, 2013).

Given the narrative structure of the way we interact with the world and with others, reasons that we give each other have a temporal dimension. For example, in one sense the decision of the Supreme Court of the US allowing gay marriage was about its here and now. It shaped the relationship between people in the present. But at the same time, it was future oriented. Different people situated this decision in the context of different projects – the long-arc of the struggle for equality, the changing meaning of marriage, the changing meaning of religious freedom, and so forth. The different alternatives that were considered by different participants in the debate (marriage, civil union, criminalization of gay relationship, etc.) got their meanings in the context of these different projects. The decision of the Supreme Court also gets its meaning in the context of these projects (as a victory, a setback, a compromise, etc.).

At any point, different peoples or groups interpret their actions and those of others through different projects. As political projects, they are often built on an expectation or anticipation that people will come to see things in ways that are different from the way they see them now. Communism anticipates that people will come to value cooperation over competition, cosmopolitanism envisions valuing foreigners as highly as compatriots, while nationalism presumes people will prioritize their own tradition (c.f. Erman & Kuyper, 2020). Such expectations have a dual character. They make a normative claim about what others should value and a conditional empirical prediction about what others would value in case a course of action will be taken. The normative and the empirical claims are tied to each other – the claim is that those who experience the change will come to see or value things in a different way.

Therefore, unlike the individual case, which requires only a diachronic conversation with a future-self, reason giving in the public sphere has both a synchronic and diachronic character. We exchange reasons with others who are present here and now. At the same time, some of the arguments that we make address not our present interlocutors but their future selves. These arguments are based on predictions about the horizon of these future selves.

This framework allows us to think through the role of social science in the division of labor between the two appeals. Social science can be viewed as providing the explanation for how one's horizons are likely to change. To see this point, it is helpful to look at the two most extreme cases. The first is full paternalism. In this case, one partner to the conversation makes arguments that take away any normative authority from the present interlocutor and justify their case only based on the appeal to the future self ("I don't care about what you think now; I can predict that you will change and then you will see that I was right"). Here, the entire normative authority falls on the causal explanation that would vindicate the claim regarding the horizons of the future self. The other case is where the entire normative authority falls on the empirical acceptability by the present interlocutor ("you, and only you, can be the judge of your future values").
But these are extreme cases. Most of the reasons that we give fall in between these two extreme and they cannot serve as the prototypes of justification. In most cases, we invite our interlocutors

to imagine and plan for the future with us, a future in which our separate and shared horizons will be different from the present ones. These exchanges of reasons distribute the normative and epistemic authority between the interlocutors. We have to anticipate and predict how our horizons will change, and we have to rely on each other to verify the feasibility of these predictions. What the interpretive approach to the study of political feasibility shows, then, is that by its very character the assessment of political feasibility is a process that takes place in the context of a conversation among interlocutors in the public sphere.

Feasibility, Knowledge, and Interpretation

Building on the discussion in the previous two sections, my purpose in this section is to examine how the very terms that we use to understand our relationship with our future shape the way seek knowledge about what is feasible. It should be emphasized that my question here is philosophical and not methodological. I am studying the phenomenology of feasibility, not looking for a method that will allow us to determine what is feasible in a more accurate way.

There is no doubt that what I described as the analytical tradition captures the way we use the term political feasibility in everyday language: we find some course of action or future state of affair to be desirable, and we ask ourselves whether there is a chance that it can be brought about. To illustrate this way of thinking about feasibility, imagine a video game in which the player controls a character who can choose routes that lead them to different destinations, and in each destination, they collect different number of points. Along the way, the character encounters different objects, each with different properties that can affect how they move along the path to the desired destinations. For example, some objects are completely unpassable, others are sometimes passable and sometimes not, and others can be passed only through collaboration with other players. The player has to collect as many points as possible and they do so by taking into account the different objects that stand in their way. Over time, players in this hypothetical game can try to learn the properties of the different objects that they may encounter. The knowledge of the properties of these objects allows the player to predict which routes are more feasible.

I will present the interpretive version of the game later in this section. But, before, it is important to note that there is another "realist" way of thinking about social change that attempts to rely on the explanatory power of social science rather than on its predictive power. In this view, social entities, structures, or institutions have real properties that account for the causal powers that they have. Furthermore, these properties can be the subject of moral evaluation based on their social function. Once we understand the properties of these entities and the effects that they have, we can focus on mitigating the negative effects and promoting the positive ones. David Wiens (2012) describes one such approach as "institutional failure analysis." In a similar vein, some realist readings of Karl Marx interpret his anti-utopianism as seeking to ground progressive social change in the emancipatory potential of social scientific explanations (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 345). Those who focus on the explanatory power of social science are generally opposed to the idea of planning that is oriented towards a future state of affairs. They suggest that given the social complexity and the limited predictive power of social science the very project of orienting ourselves towards a certain goal is futile and potentially dangerous. Instead, they argue that social reform should be focused on repairing existing ills for a slightly improved immediate future.

My aim here is not to argue against each of these ways of using social scientific knowledge in planning. Instead, my point is that the social science has a role in facilitating conversations about political feasibility. To make this claim, I first want to examine how the interpretive conception of political feasibility understands the relationship between the present and the future.

For the interpretive conception, the very building block of the analytic approach, the idea of a "political state of affairs" that exists independently of the way we interpret it, is misguided. The future cannot be parsed out to a set of discrete alternatives that can be described independently of the way we evaluate them. Instead, for the interpretive approach, the building blocks are narratives. These narratives connect the past, the present, and the future and assign meanings to them (MacGilvray, 2004, chapter 3). It is fairly common for students of history to claim that our understanding of the past has a narrative form. But, if our understanding of the past has a narrative form, this must also be the case with our understanding of the future. In the previous section, I described the narratives that shape our relationship with the future as "projects" (to use terms employed by both Rawls (1993, p. 398) and Habermas (1996, p. 384)). Individual or collective planning do not take place against a future that is a *tabula rasa*. Rather, we always evaluate each plan that we have, or a policy or a law that we want to enact, against the horizons of a broader project that gives meaning to what we would consider as a progress.

Going back to the video game analogy I presented earlier, the interpretive approach can be described using a modified version of the game. In the modified version, the points assigned to different destinations change as the main character interact with various objects through these encounters. What appeared as a very desirable destination at the beginning may turn out not to be so once the character eventually reaches it. The trials and tribulations that they endure changes the character of the player and the values that they assign to different destinations. In this version of the hypothetical game, it would be futile not to take this into account when assessing the feasibility of different action plans. However, to assess the feasibility of reaching different destinations, the player has to study not only the external objects that encounter along the way, but also study themselves and consider how they would transform through these encounters.

Conclusions

When studying politics, it is often the case that the concepts that we use – concepts such as power, freedom, democracy, or representation – have multiple and complex meanings. A careful elucidation of commonsense or ordinary usage can capture key aspects of meaning but may overlook others. I believe that this is also the case for the concept of political feasibility. On the one hand, the everyday language meaning of political feasibility captures the everyday phenomenology of planning. Yet, at the same time, in complex situations, this way of thinking about political feasibility is surprisingly unhelpful for understanding the role of empirical political science in planning. In complex situations, political science models can rarely vindicate any intuitions that we have about what is feasible with any degree of confidence.

If so, why should we care about political feasibility at all? Some argue that we should not. Pragmatically speaking, considerations related to feasibility (and by extension the use of empirical political analysis for planning) are rarely helpful for normative evaluation of long-term or complex plans. The future is more open than we often perceive it to be and therefore we are free to imagine

and hope for better worlds. But at the same time and for the same reasons, detailed planning for how to reach these more ideal worlds are futile.

Finally, let me repeat a point I made in the beginning. The purpose of this article is not to identify a method for how to assess possibility but to study the very meaning of the concept of political feasibility. In the same way that a discussion of the philosophy of history is different from a discussion of the actual practices by which historians study the past, my purpose here is not to assess the different possible sites, social relations, and mechanisms of reason-giving that may be conducive for the assessment of political feasibility. The purpose of the conceptual analysis I developed in this article is to offer a way to think about political feasibility that allows us to account for the role of empirical social science in planning. In the interpretation, social science helps us to assess the feasibility of the meanings of future state of affairs. It does so by allowing us to provide plausible causal narratives of how we will come to see things differently: how the horizons of our present selves can be transformed to those of our future selves. But these plausible mechanisms can be validated only in the context of conversation with others who are partners to the shared project.

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