# Challenges Ahead for Political Science in Europe

Speaking Notes for COST Keynote Address

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Thank you to Isabelle Engeli, Giliberto Capano and the COST organizers and hosts for the kind invitation to address your conference. The question that I was posed – Challenges ahead for political science in Europe – has two parts:

1. Assessing the current reality – that has to be the basis of outlining the challenges, and;

2. Reviewing the state of the discipline in light of these challenges. And this in turn has two dimensions – what is the empirical impact of the challenges, and what should be (a normative issue) the response.

This will be outline of my talk today – first, assessing the reality and the challenges, and second, the potential impact on the discipline. I hope this will touch some or all of the four points that this COST Action General Meeting will be addressing.

**CHALLENGES AHEAD**

Everyone knows the list of our current afflictions – rising nationalism, authoritarianism, xenophobia, terrorism, the retreat of globalization, Brexit and the collapse of Europe, climate change, inequality, continued economic stagnation, the rise of robots. I could go on. But you deserve more than a list, and so let me try to isolate those that are more central to our discipline (and I will spend a little time later trying to define what I see as the essence of our craft). I will touch on two broad, deep challenges:

1. The public discourse Challenge

2. The regime challenge

*Public Discourse Challenge*

The first challenge is what I call the public discourse challenge – the challenge to civil discourse in the public square, which affects as well our sense of "truth" and "science". Our discipline is called "political *science*", and so this challenge is an almost existential one – as professors, and scholars, and researchers we are engaged in the search (maybe never achieved) for "truth", and we try to go about that search scientifically, rigorously, and objectively. The entire apparatus of the profession – from training to peer review – is dedicated to this self-conception. Now of course, as all of you have heard, we live in a "post-truth" world, full of fake news and alternative facts. More significantly, science itself is being challenged as either (1) politicized (e.g., attacks on the EPA in the US as using science as a thin justification for a mania of regulatory initiatives; similar attacks on the IPCC and its research on climate change), or actually (2) culturally biased. In my country, for example, indigenous groups are trying to

reclaim their "ways of knowing" which they are argue are rooted in a different cosmology, and hence, while different from western science, are equivalent and even sometimes superior (for example, in consideration of fisheries or habitats).

Of course, in the social sciences there have long been debates about epistemology and science, from the somewhat arcane debates between Kuhn and Popper and Feyerabend on scientific method, to the use of "lenses" to see things differently and more clearly (e.g., a gender lens, or more recently, and within the government of Canada, an "intersectional lens"), to the importance of ideology and framing in policy debates, to the far outer reaches of post-modernism. So, at one level, we shouldn't be upset about this – the rest of the world is just catching up to the epistemological indeterminacy that we have all, as social scientists, come to accept as just part of the intellectual furniture. But we're confronting something different today, and it is coloured and driven by the decline of civil discourse in the public square.

What do I mean by that? Several things:

1. The *expansion* of the public square in the digital age. Forty years ago, the channels of political communication were much narrower, at least as they shaped what was perceived to be the "national discourse." Mainstream print media, a handful of television stations, and mainstream political parties. I'm not saying that that was particularly good, but it did mean that there was a narrower band of claims about what the terms of debate were, as well as the normative perspectives.

2. With that expansion has come – and this was not anticipated in the early, heady days of the internet, the almost limitless multiplication of views, channels, positions, and groups, all using the technology.

3. Expansion and the viral transmission of communication means that what would have been fringe or isolated in the past – the alt right, for example – now can find a voice, a presence, and whatever it says can spread quickly and add to the noise, if not the substance, of political debate. This is "post-truth" politics.

4. Communications has not just expanded and accelerated, but it has been weaponized. Groups from every corner of the political spectrum have no need for filters, they know how important political communications is, and increasingly have no compunction (indeed, given the acceleration and compression of political and news cycles, they have an incentive), to spread rumours, half-truths, slander, personal attacks. There is even an appetite (George Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*) to be iconoclastic, ironic, smirking.

5. Coupled with this has been what appears to be greater willingness by political leaders to lie and exaggerate, to spin and to refuse to acknowledge even the most rock-solid empirical facts.

6. All of the above get mixed into the phenomenon of "fake news," which has come into the lexicon, to the extent that in the UK there was a parliamentary inquiry into it. There are too many angles to this to explore, from the liability of news reporters and outlets who generate fake news for ideological or commercial reasons, to the culpability of search engines and Facebook, to the use of social media (Twitter in particular, but also seeding other news sources) but dark forces through bots and digital manipulation.

There is so much out there, and so much confusion and contradiction, that it is hard to know who to believe, and so – and this is an ironic outcome of *more* political information and debate – it is perfectly understandable that people, institutions, and political actors increasingly retreat to hard ideological positions. To their echo chambers. "Post-truth" has made it more difficult, rather than less, to have rational debates about issues. Every position is suspect, every "fact" open to scrutiny, interpretation, spin. We have all noticed, I think, the decline in the quality of public debate, the dignity of political discourse, the aspiration to argument rather than invective.

This coarsening of public discourse, of civic discourse, has implications in academe, and of course with particular force in our discipline to the extent that political science addresses public policy issues. Again, a short list of these implications:

1. The need to include alternative perspectives – in the sense of epistemologies and ways of knowing, which translates into different research questions and even methods – into our collective work. This has been long process in the US around the inclusion of gender and race studies, and in Canada, as I mentioned, there is now pressure, because of an official national government stance on reconciliation with indigenous peoples, of an indigenous lens, programs, etc.

2. Increasing pressures on academics and institutions to "take a position" – if there is no such thing as objectivity, then everyone is expected to have, either explicitly as a political stance or implicitly as a political bias, a position on the issues of the day. In Canada there was a recent court case in the province of Saskatchewan, where a jury found a white farmer, Gerald Stanley, not guilty in the shooting of an indigenous

youth, Colten Boushie. My university president released a statement, purportedly on behalf of the entire university community, implying in not-so-subtle terms, that the verdict was racist [https://carleton.ca/president/messages-and-speeches/justice-progress-indigenous-peoples-canada/ ].

3. Because of the hardening of political lines I mentioned above, and the blurring of the lines between science and advocacy, the stakes in otherwise ordinary academic activities are perceived to be very high. US campuses in particular have had a spate of protests against speakers (usually, but not exclusively, of a more conservative bent). Again, if I can use a more innocuous Canadian example, a graduate student named Lyndsay Shepherd was reprimanded for showing several minutes of an interview on the public broadcaster TV station with Jordan Peterson to her undergraduate class. The charge was that students had complained, the ideas that Peterson was expression were a slippery slope towards hate, etc. [https://globalnews.ca/news/3923478/wilfrid-laurier-no-complaint-lindsay-shepherd/ ].

As I said, at one level none of this is new – as scholars we are used to epistemological dates and alternative perspectives, and many of us have had our "post-modern" moment. But most of the rest of the world was not "post-modern" in the sense of radically rejecting *any* truth claims. We seem to be inching closer to this situation, where any claim to truth or objectivity is dismissed as ideological, every piece of evidence is suspect, and everything is part of political strategy and of wins and losses. The fortunes of a "political *science*" in this environment – even a political science which, as I will argue in a moment, has normative foundations – are uncertain.

*Regime Challenge: Liberal-Democratic Order*

The main story here of course is one that is painfully familiar to this audience – the attacks upon and reversals of what even four or five years ago would have been accepted as the natural order in western political systems and the ultimate aspiration of all others – liberal democracy or open society. I would actually broaden this to the "liberal democratic-social-economic order" since by the mid-2000s it had evolved well beyond the classic institutions of liberal-democracy: basic freedoms, free elections, accountable institutions. The "liberal democratic-social-economic order" was built on the early foundations and came to embrace globalization as a positive thing (both economically and socially); open borders, migration and a resultant diversity of national populations; a deepened range of human rights; a developed welfare state. The exemplars might be the European Union, and if I may add immodestly, perhaps Canada as well.

This model was the one that triumphed with the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was the model that underpinned "democracy promotion" efforts by the West, both to the former Soviet satellites, but also around the world. It was the anchor of the EU project as it evolved beyond simply economic union. And of course, it was the normative model underpinning our discipline. In my book on the state of the discipline in central and eastern Europe, co-edited with the friend and colleague Rainer Eisfeld (who, incidentally, is writing a book on the future of political science, and has much influenced my own thinking here today), we noted the role of international organizations, bilateral aid agencies, especially USAID, and of course the Soros Foundation, in literally re-building political science in the countries in the region. And what they were "selling" was open society, liberal democracy, and a liberal order, broadly defined.

There have been three types of challenges to this liberal order, all serious, but one more alarming. The **first challenge** has been the increase in authoritarian regimes around the world – an increase in their number and their weight in global politics. What has appeared as the inexorable march of history toward freedom and open society has been blocked and countered. Larry Diamond and colleagues edited a book two years ago entitled *Authoritarianism Goes Global: The Challenges to Democracy* – a title which says it all. The Freedom House 2018 edition of its annual report, *Freedom in the World,* is entitled "Democracy in Crisis" and reports:

- Democracy faced its most serious crisis in decades in 2017 as its basic tenets—including guarantees of free and fair elections, the rights of minorities, freedom of the press, and the rule of law—came under attack around the world.

- Seventy-one countries suffered net declines in political rights and civil liberties, with only 35 registering gains. This marked the 12th consecutive year of decline in global freedom.

The **second challenge** is closer to home, and that of course is the rise of authoritarian governments and opposition parties and movements in the western democracies themselves, here in Europe and arguably in the United States as well. You are well aware of these developments.

Both of these are what I would call "external challenges" – either from other models or regime types (strong democracy; illiberal democracy, etc.) or from self-proclaimed opponents to the conventional liberal order. The **third challenge** it seems to me is more serious, and that is the challenge posed for defenders and proponents of this liberal order by that order's own

internal contradictions. The first two challenges simply require a defence of the order in its own terms. This last requires possibly re-thinking the order itself. In other words, this is an *internal challenge*, and internal critique, a self-reflection, and I would say, an expression of self-doubt and soul-searching. It's one thing for a Marxist to dismiss bourgeois democracy, or an alt-right to sneer about identity politics. It's another when Michael Ignatieff, the President and Rector of Central European University, a former leader of the Liberal Party of Canada, a renowned scholar and liberal thinker in his own right, launches a "Rethinking Open Society Project". I've been struck by the recent spike in initiatives to look into the very soul of the liberal order:

- David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics*

- Jan Zielonka, *Counter-Revolution: Liberal Europe in Retreat*

- Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*

- Ryszard Legutko, *The Demon in Democracy: Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies*

- The *Anxieties of Democracy* Project by the (US) Social Sciences Research Council

- Cass Sunstein (ed.) *Can it Happen Here?* [due out in May 2018]

- Steve Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*

- David Frum, *Trumpocracy: The Corruption of the American Republic*

What are some of the internal contradictions of the liberal-democratic order as it has evolved in the last fifty years, and identified in some of this soul-searching? Two obvious ones of course are (1) rising inequality – this is due to liberal-democracy's sometimes uneasy partnership with liberal capitalism – and (2) increasingly compromised political and electoral

systems in which voters either do not care and cannot be engaged, or are engaged only as fringe and anti-liberal groups, or in which politicians are corrupted, inept or simply personally bizarre. But a few other, less obvious, internal contradictions are troubling the friends and partisans of liberalism. I'll mention only a few:

1.  Universal individualism vs. identitarian individualism: Liberalism is often criticized for ignoring roots and localisms, striving for some sort of universal cosmopolitanism that only elites – Davos Man – is capable of achieving. But liberalism has also been a struggle for freedom, and for many, their freedom is compromised by inequalities due to their group affiliations and identities, whether it be gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, etc. Contemporary liberalism is struggling to balance its inclination to dismiss difference as irrelevant to how people live together (hence the openness to migration), and its instinct to fight for the rights of ever smaller and smaller minority groups.

2.  Free speech vs. speech acts: The hallmarks of classical liberalism were the defence of free speech, and tolerance of opposing views. There is a long running debate in that tradition of how far that could go, and what the acceptable limits are to speech, but within that tradition there was an underlying assumption that "speech acts" represented debatable ideas and ideational debates. However, modern liberalism is very much alive to speech as symbol, to speech as sometimes the masked expression of disgusting and deeply rooted prejudices, and speech as implicated in the continued oppression of minorities. Liberal states everywhere have therefore struggled now with hate speech codes, criminalization of speech, and intolerance to

even the most (apparently) innocuous utterances. Jordan Peterson, a Canadian academic at the University of Toronto, has become famous because of his refusal to use transgendered pronouns in the classroom.

3. Personal liberty vs. social context: This is a fairly traditional critique of liberalism – that unbridled personal liberty (in the market, in the expression and pursuit of personal tastes), even among consenting adults, can corrode the social conventions and bonds and restraints that make a civil society (and civility) possible. This argument goes back to Burke, of course, and has been reiterated by such conservative thinkers as Roger Scruton, but also by liberal theorists like Michael Sandel. The *New York Times* magazine on February 7, 2018 had a feature entitled "What Teenagers are Learning from On-Line Porn", which had predictable and disturbing findings. Ross Douthat, in his editorial column a week later, mused about the possible option of banning (or at least somehow severely restricting access to) porn. Again, the ensuing debate was fairly predictable: firm liberal positions about the freedom to produce and consumer; feminist arguments that the problem is actually a misogynist culture; and critiques of the article as being sadly heteronormative and ignoring the liberating power of porn for the LGBTQI communities.

4. Individual freedom vs. increasing state regulation and penetration of economy and social life. This is a point, of course, that goes back to Tocqueville's observations of the nature of liberalism in American democracy, but is something that is increasingly noted by observers of modern liberalism. Even as our personal autonomies increase

(in terms of markets, consumption of every conceivable good; in social life, without constraints to pursue our personal preferences as long as they do not harm others), we see a persistent presence of a large, administrative, and regulatory state. One explanation (Deneen – a critic, so not within the family), is that one vector of liberalism as a system is both the erosion of intermediate associations (Tocqueville), and the use of the state increasingly to remove obstacles to autonomy and liberty, and indeed to go further and support the autonomies and freedoms of individuals through the provision of services, regulations, prohibitions against discrimination or ill-treatment, and so on. But this autonomy and freedom that people feel in the lives as consumers and as expressive artists of their personal lifestyles, is not matched with any sense of real control over the state, and so autonomy becomes empty and de-politicized.

These are four examples of internal regime contradictions or tensions or inconsistencies – ones identified for the most part by those who support liberalism and liberal democratic regimes. Let me suggest a couple of emerging, and troubling, additional features of modern liberal regimes that may not be internal contradictions, but certainly are difficult to reconcile with the best logic of the regime:

1. *Google and Facebook and privacy*: The sheer size of these corporations – what is sometimes referred to as FANG (Facebook, Apple, Netflix, Google) – is itself remarkable, so much so that even some conservative free marketers (e.g., *The Economist*) have called for more robust regulation. But this is more than the traditional trust-busting, or just the usual phenomenon of large corporations

dominating their sectors. To the extent that they dominate the internet, and to the extent that we are turning into internet-based or attention-based economies, these companies can dominate entire swathes of the economy, and increasingly because they are social media, society as well. The other dimension is that sheer scope and scale of the gathering of information about individuals – never in human history has so much information been gathered about so many people but such powerful entities – this is well beyond the imaginings of an Orwell, a Stalin or a *Stasi*. The EU has taken regulatory steps, Germany has investigated data breaches, so this is not impossible to control. It's just that this seems to me to be a completely different political landscape in terms of preference formation, influence over news, and what gets the attention of citizens.

2. *Capacities for state surveillance*: This is a sort of extension as well as a mirror image of the last point. I've always been struck at how our discipline has tended, on the whole, to leave the security apparatus of the state up to our colleagues in international relations, and even then, usually with respect to foreign intelligence and espionage. Domestic surveillance has received less attention, though of course not completely ignored. Again, what we seem to be seeing is something completely new, courtesy of technology, some of which is in the private sector among the FANG companies. Big data capacities coupled with technologies like facial recognition and CCT cameras everywhere – surely this is something never contemplated in our textbook renditions of the relations of governments to citizens. On a recent trip to London, the western city with the greatest number of CCT cameras, I decided to take

special notice of the cameras, to look for them explicitly. It's quite an experience when you actually realize how few of your public movements are beyond the scrutiny of some security camera. The University of Toronto's Citizen Lab, run by my colleague Ron Deibert, has chilling research on the capacities of authoritarian governments to monitor their citizens, but also commercial spyware, and the demands of security agencies in democratic countries for access to consumer databases and even deliberate "back doors" in phones.

3. *Election campaigns and citizen engagement*: Our Poli Sci model of political systems assumes that elections are fought by independent political parties, that citizens vote for them based on platforms, and that citizen engagement more broadly is also a matter of self-conscious mobilization. Of course, we complicate that picture by looking at political manipulation, lobbying, media bias, framing effects, corruption etc., but the basic model is still a closed system. On February 16, the Mueller investigation grand jury indicted a Russian oligarch (Yevgeny Prigozhin) and 13 others for operating a troll factory (the Internet Research Agency) for allegedly interfering in the US 2016 election (actually going back as far as 2014). They were alleged to have created fictitious social-media personas, spreading falsehoods and promoting messages supportive of Donald J. Trump and critical of Hillary Clinton. I don't think that we should be entirely shocked by this – let's not be naïve. In fact, it simply is a case of the Russians catching up to the US – "democracy promotion" was a way of explicitly interfering in other political systems, as was and is "good governance" efforts undertaken by the EU in the MENA region for example. This

shows that the electoral systems are not as "closed" as our conventional models would assert. Neither are other types of political mobilization. The migration issue in Europe, for example, is being fought at the national level by international human rights foundations. Again, the trans-nationalization of political issues is not new, but it may have reached a tipping point where it makes little sense any longer to see domestic politics and policy making as *domestic.*

Obviously, each one of these examples is connected to new technologies, big data, and the internet. That is giving away a bias, but I think it is simply a fact that ICTs have profoundly changed the nature and the layout of the conventional furniture that we have taken for granted in our discipline.

Now that I have outlined some challenges, what are the implications for our discipline?


## POLITICAL SCIENCE IN EUROPE AND ELSEWHERE

The answer to that question depends in part on how we understand and define the discipline, both in terms of its disciplinary focus (as distinct from other social sciences), and its normative position.

This is a personal view, of course, but to me the essence and beauty of our discipline – certainly what attracted me to it, and excites me every day about it – is that it has a unique focus on the tangled tensions and connections of power, justice, and order. Power, of course, is first and foremost, in its most brutish and comprehensive form, the power of the state, manifest through its monopoly of force over its population, its protection of its borders, and its

relations (benign or belligerent) with other states. That is the bread and butter of political science, and has been since Aristotle. How state power is wielded, shaped and mobilized, how it is resisted, blunted, or absorbed, how it is used by tyrants or put to the service of citizens – all this is core to what we do. And, of course, power is not simply state power – it is manifest in social power, in social institutions, in the family, among men and women, in communities, between and among groups, and so political science ventures well beyond the bounds of state analysis to follow power into all its capillaries, to borrow from Foucault.

The other great vector of our discipline, it seems to me, is the understanding of justice – of the *legitimate* basis of power, of how relations in society can and should be arranged on the basis of fairness. Power without justice is simply force. And so our discipline can rightly claim a long tradition of political theory and philosophy even among those thinkers who might not have thought of themselves first and foremost as political theorists. To the extent that they have reflected on the state and its legitimate foundations, they have reflected on justice. And this leads to order – how human societies can and should organize themselves, regulate their collective interests and activities, and create the conditions for other realms of social and economic life to flourish.

Does the discipline have a normative stance? This is tricky, and I have to admit that my personal inclinations are more towards dispassionate analysis than political engagement. However, we can take some guidance from our own professional associations:

We are firmly convinced that it was in this spirit of appreciating the rich potential  of

political science to provide ways to better attain peace, economic opportunity, human

rights, participatory democracy, and, ultimately, individual fulfillment that led to our

task force being appointed. We respect our discipline and our profession enough to see its ever- expanding potential.

*APSA, Political Science in the 21st Century (2011)*

"Ultimately, IPSA supports the role of political science in empowering men and women to participate more effectively in political life, whether within or beyond the states in which they live."

*IPSA: Mission Statement (2011)*

I'm sorry to say that my own national political science association has no equivalent mission statement, though in practice it has been a site of discussions of key, practical issues of Canadian governance – identity, multiculturalism, indigenous governance, multilingual societies, immigration and so on. As another clue, I looked to the ECPR, and while it lacks a mission statement of the calibre of IPSA's, the focus of its roundtables in past conferences shows a direct engagement in the normative issues of our time. Here are the roundtables from the 2017 ECPR:

**2017 ECPR Roundtables**

Roundtable: The Future of the European Welfare States

Roundtable: The Consequences of the Internalization of Political Science Education

Roundtable: Equality in Recession? Transnational Developments

Roundtable: Democratic Representation in Interconnected Settings

So, I think it's clear that there is a normative stance to political science as a discipline, even if it is quite a broad one – the constraint of political and social power by considerations of justice in the service of creating political orders that permit and encourage human flourishing. I would go even further and argue that in its broad inspiration and its core principles, this translates into a preferential bias towards liberal-democratic regimes. I think the Western version of this model, stemming from our Greek, Judeo-Christian heritage, is an important foundation, but many of the key principles are reflected as well in Islamic traditions of governance and possibly even in some ancient forms of tribal governance (e.g., Haudenosaunee Confederacy).

If that is what the discipline is about, how should it respond to the challenges I have outlines above: regime challenge, public discourse challenge, and the black swan challenge? Of course, the conventional response from academics to any challenge is "more research." That's all fine, but I'm not entirely convinced that the issues I have touched on are being ignored. At last count, for example, the ISI Web of Science lists 165 political science journals. A glance at the major conferences in the discipline in the last few years, IPSA, ECPR, and APSA in particular, not to mention the almost infinite number of regional conferences and topic-specific workshops, global think tanks and so on, would suggest that almost every conceivable topic is indeed being researched by someone, somewhere. Where new research, perhaps with a new focus, is warranted, that of course is fine. But what I am going to suggest is more in the way of sensitivities and orientations, in how we do our work, and how we engage with our students and with the public, and with decision-makers. Some ideas:

1. Be Tocquevilles for our Age: If I am even half-right about the challenges, then there are major, tectonic shifts underway. Upheaval in conventional political systems, political orders, political debates – and a great murmuration of black swans. We have the obligation and the opportunity to be Tocqueville's of our times, observers and reporters from the frontiers of these challenges. Tocqueville visited America to see a new form of political order – real democracy, uncontaminated by a legacy of aristocracy. His work stands up even today for its insight into the logic of the system he observed, his grasp of the meaning of political behaviours and assumptions in the new republic.

2. Defend evidence:  We can't be naïve about this, but it seems to me that our discipline (like other social science disciplines) should uphold two principles. First, consider, reflect and debate what is put forward as evidence (as facts). Second, remain fully committed to the *evidentiary process*, that is, to reasoned steps and requirements of presenting evidence, and to the reasonable bases of accepting things as truth or as facts, even if this truth or these facts are always open to conjecture and refutation (to borrow from Popper).

In closing I would suggest that we remember the unique combination of concerns that lies at the heart of our discipline – power, justice, and order. I don't pretend to know that answers that necessarily arise from this anchoring, but I do think it is unique and precious. It can serve citizens, and it can serve policy makers.