1 THE AGE OF POPULISM

A number of preliminary matters must be dealt with before we can proceed to the central arguments of this book. So let us do that now, and then get down to business starting in Chapter 2: The Temple of Science.

A Compound Proposition

My first postulate is that we live in an Age of Populism. Like it or not, that is where we are. I will refer to populist president Donald Trump frequently as we move along. Indeed, as I write these lines, he so dominates America's public conversation that I am tempted to call the times we live in the Age of Trump. However, to name our era after Donald Trump would be to exaggerate his importance because this president is just a symptom of modern trends that have brought America to where it is today. These trends – in values, in expectations, in work, in information, in technology, in family relations, in international trade, in public manners, in finance, in politics, and more – will continue to shape the nation's life for many years to come, and not only in welcome ways.

Ergo, scholars and pundits have labeled the output of such trends populistic, not Trumpian. From that point of view, it is the overall condition, rather than the passing instance, which weighs most significantly on the country. Accordingly, I propose, while public life seems especially threatened and vulnerable these days, that some political scientists, whose profession is especially focused on that life, will address our political circumstances, in a populist age, by highlighting the

disruptive results of what economists call "creative destruction."[27] Later, I will discuss creative destruction at some length.

But why highlight *economics* when our object is *politics*? Because, beyond the importance of this or that case of creative destruction, the overall exercise is a dynamic process of innovation in modern society that rewards some people – like Bill Gates, software engineers, accountants, Michael Bloomberg, hedge-fund managers, James Dyson, doctors, lawyers, investment bankers, Sam Walton – and penalizes others, like the workers sent home when General Motors closed its 4.8-million-square-foot assembly plant (larger than the Pentagon) in Janesville, Wisconsin in December, 2008.[28] Or, it rewards some high-tech communities, like New York and San Jose, while it punishes others in the Rust Belt, like Youngstown or Detroit. Therefore, in my view, this creative destruction, which is praised by most politicians for its ability to generate "economic growth," is extremely dangerous for upending millions of citizens' lives and thus powerfully challenging the basic institutions and practices of American democracy.

My proposition, then, is (1) that there is a national crisis, which I will call the Age of Populism; (2) that much of that crisis is caused by the results of creative destruction; and (3) that some scholars, but especially political scientists, should commit themselves, via research and teaching, to trying to mitigate those results. This is a compound proposition whose various elements, and the strategy I want to suggest for confronting them, will take some time, throughout this book, to explain.

What is Political Science For?

As for how my colleagues might relate to all this, we should begin by asking: What is political science for? Political scientists do not always ask that question explicitly.[29] They usually feel that what they are doing – which is studying politics – is so obviously important to society that they need not discuss its

rationale at length. What they do instead, in political science departments from one college and university to another, is teach classes about their discipline's "scope and methods." In those classes, the professors discuss what sorts of people, events, procedures, and institutions should be subjects of political research. This is the matter of "scope." Additionally, they discuss how such things should be investigated. This is the matter of "methods."

This book extends those discussions, in that it explores a package of scope and methods that might be appropriate for some political scientists today. But for the moment, let us phrase the matter differently. Let us consider that, underneath talk about which subjects to study and how, there lies a large and sometimes unstated question, which is about what purposes political science should serve in a modern, democratic country.

I regard that question not as an invitation to theoretical speculation but as a call for immediate action. That is because "What is political science for?" is an urgent question that arises in a specific social, economic, and political environment that worries me greatly, and that is the Age of Populism. Are we not therefore somehow, at least somewhat, obliged to consider the nature and dynamics of that environment?

Now if, in the pages that follow, we will think along those lines, we will see that for some political scientists there may be, in all of this, a special role to play, an exceptional contribution of research, teaching, and publishing to offer students and colleagues, friends and neighbors, activists and pundits, a testimony, in some respects – in other words, a special vision of what at least part of political science is for. I will return to that possible project but, first, let us place it in perspective.

A Previous Political Era

Many of the trends that brought Donald Trump to power (such as political polarization, gerrymandering, globalization, automation, outsourcing, round-the-clock news, the gig economy,

immigration, deindustrialization, too-big-to-fail banks, gated communities, silo thinking, click-bait journalism, digital addiction, platform capitalism, identity politics, media extremism, perpetual wars, educational elitism, and more) will remain after his administration and continue to shape public life. Therefore, although this president did not create the Age of Populism, it is epitomized in him, in the trends that brought him to power, and in the enthusiasm for, and the opposition to, what he says, does, and stands for.

That being the case, it is safe to predict that, in years to come, hundreds of books and thousands of articles, blogs, Facebook and Twitter posts, etc., will be written about Donald Trump. They will look back to analyze where he came from, and they will explore how his election and administration affected how Americans lived together. Anxiety will animate many of the people who will write those books, and they will divide, roughly speaking, between (1) those who believe that much in American life was appalling and therefore Trump's authenticity was the solution,[30] and (2) those who will feel that Trump himself was appalling, in which case the country had to undo much of what he said and did.[31]

Some such books have already been written. I won't take sides among them, but I want to note that the present wave of severe anxiety, fueled by conflicting fears and convictions, is not unique in the cycles of American public life.[32] For example, a similar upheaval struck America in the 1920s and 1930s, after an unspeakably horrible world war, when an old and largely aristocratic order was breaking down in many European countries, and when economic upheavals and hardships threatened America, most obviously in the Crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression.

We should recall, then, that while America in those years experienced dangerous events at home and abroad, the interval between World War I and World War II was a time when, like today, some Americans went sharply right and others went sharply left.[33] This happened because many people worried that existing political institutions – from political parties to national

elections, from federal agencies to judicial review – might fail to preserve democracy in the face of brutal alternatives such as fascism and communism. As challenges arose, Americans became aware of shocking circumstances, such as the 25-percent unemployment rate at home,[34] breadlines in the streets, inflation in Weimar Germany, famine in the Soviet Union, the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, pogroms against German Jews, the Moscow trials, the civil war in Spain,[35] the annexation of the Sudetenland, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and more. Most obviously, they saw that compelling ideologies took center stage in Europe, to the point where autocrats and dictators rose to power in Russia, Germany, Italy, Spain, Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, Turkey, Albania, Poland, Portugal, Yugoslavia, Austria, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.

In those inter-war years, Americans agonized a great deal over matters of political principle. This was because, when challenged by right-wing and left-wing thinkers, who advocated dramatic and even charismatic leadership, democracy inspired by eighteenth-century Enlightenment ideals of moderate and sensible public behavior became difficult to defend. In a society increasingly committed to science and tangible metrics in industry, agriculture, commerce, transportation, education, and more, American faith in a higher law of natural rights, which via the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights had historically justified the nation's constitutional and representative government,[36] seemed to many American thinkers a fragile inheritance, philosophically speaking, of well-intentioned but somewhat anachronistic Founders.[37]

In short, much of the inter-war anxiety called into question fundamental American institutions and practices. Accordingly, some fears in those days were almost apocalyptic, like some of the fears that fuel political anxiety today. Nevertheless, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal devised a set of federal agencies and public policies – such as the Securities and Exchange Commission, the Social Security Commission, the National Labor Relations Board, farm subsidies, bank deposit insurance, rural electrification, public works, and

more – to alleviate some of the Depression's major problems. Consequently, many Americans proceeded after World War II as if the systemic ruptures and failures that had alarmed them earlier had eventually been repaired.

Causes for post-war optimism abounded. Victory against Germany, Italy, and Japan inspired ideological confidence. The economy boomed and promised to continue growing via trade, science, and technology. The country enjoyed years of democratic progress, wherein McCarthyism was deplorable but injured relatively few people, while civil rights made considerable gains, though not large enough. From 1945 to the mid-1970s, many workers enjoyed industrial peace, while unions were strong and corporations were accommodating. Everyone knew that a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union would be catastrophic, but most people assumed that it had been postponed indefinitely by the Cold War stalemate based on mutually assured destruction (MAD). And then, of course, in 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed, and democracy by American standards seemed poised to spread throughout the world.

Populism

We should recall these events not because they demonstrate that America solved its largest problems (we are still struggling with some of those). Rather, they indicate, in the Age of Populism, that we need not feel uniquely stressed because our culture and society are threatened by immensely powerful dislocations. In this sense, the lesson to be learned from earlier anxieties is not that solutions to large public problems are easy to achieve but that every generation, including our own, is entitled to confront even extremely difficult circumstances with some confidence that, in time, many of them can be overcome.[38]

And that, of course, is where we are now. Today, we confront massive and unprecedented troubles with little assurance that we can keep them from destroying the post-World War II

mosaic of arrangements and understandings that for two generations kept most (but not all) Americans safe and prosperous. Post-war confidence in the "American Dream" has severely declined, for many reasons. Millions of urban and small-town manufacturing jobs have been automated away or outsourced to low-wage countries; rural families are increasingly in thrall to corporate giants like Cargill, Smithfield Foods, Monsanto, Archer Daniels Midland, Bayer, Tyson, and DuPont;[39] waves of recent immigrants are undermining the long-standing dominance of earlier immigrants and their descendants; the World Trade Center disaster on September 11, 2001 precipitated an interminable "War on Terror"; the Crash of 2008 destroyed prosperity for millions of "Main Street" families while "Wall Street" banks were bailed out by unfathomable billions of federal dollars; and the Electoral College victory of Donald Trump in 2016 led to what philosophers call a "category error" by transforming the White House into a stage for reality television.[40]

Intense efforts to understand current trends, and the costs they impose – such as crumbling infrastructure, bizarre income gaps, environmental deterioration, and plummeting social status – on many Americans in recent years have focused mainly on what scholars and journalists call "populism." This frame of mind they see as associated with the rise of Donald Trump, as generating the excitement of Bernie Sanders' primary campaign, as precipitating the election of Jeremy Corbyn to head the British Labour Party, as fueling the "Brexit" referendum on the United Kingdom leaving the European Union, and as underlying the growing power of right-wing leaders in France, Spain, Austria, Hungary, Poland, Brazil, and more.

Those who fear what they call populism accuse its enthusiasts of mistakenly preferring the principle of popular sovereignty over the complexities of actual government. Populists, they say, hope that what "the people" want will prevail in public affairs rather than that the totality of governmental institutions and instruments – a welter of legislatures, courts, commissions,

elections, regulatory agencies, police forces, trade agreements, defense treaties, central banks, and more – will continue to shape public life.[41]

Thus, Barry Eichengreen suggests that "Populism… favors direct over representative democracy insofar as elites are disproportionately influential in the selection of representatives. It favors referenda over delegating power to office holders who can't be counted on to respect the will of the people."[42] And thus Yascha Mounk observes that leaders such as Donald Trump in America, Marine Le Pen in France, Nigel Farage in Great Britain, and Victor Orban in Hungary claim that "the most pressing problems of our time" are fairly simple and can be fully understood by "the great mass of ordinary people." Nevertheless, "the political establishment" has failed to resolve those problems, in which case populists believe that "the people" should take matters into their own hands by electing officials who, in the people's name, will do the job properly.[43]

Eichengreen in *The Populist Temptation* (2018), Mounk in *The People vs. Democracy* (2018), and William Galston in *Anti-Pluralism* (2018) for the most part regard populism as indifferent to democracy and hostile to liberal virtues such as compromise, coordination, and civility. I somewhat agree with those men and I will explain why later in this book. But some other writers argue that Donald Trump and his administration are rightly promoting an "America First" strategy by taking firm steps – such as withdrawing from international treaties on "free" trade, on nuclear proliferation, and on global warming[44] – to represent the interests and preferences of Americans who feel that Washington insiders, activist judges, liberal journalists, radical professors, corrupt labor unions, and arrogant minority leaders have for too long led the country astray.[45]

The second group of writers agree with the first that America is in danger.[46] In effect, however, they hold that those who threaten its tranquility and prosperity are people who they call *pluralists* rather than *populists*, that is, people who prefer "identity politics" to patriotism, and who endorse moral "relativism"

rather than traditional virtues.[47] In which case, even though scholars and activists disagree on how to define what has gone wrong in the Age of Populism, we can conclude that both sides in this confrontation fear politics as usual because they feel that many politicians have abandoned them.[48] The result is mounting resentment in various quarters, to which I will return.

Three Responses

I believe that some political scientists should respond to such circumstances on three levels, all of which I will discuss more fully throughout this book. First, we should not so dwell on professional puzzles as to stand, unintentionally, aside from society's current needs.[49] To that end, political scientists should recall their forerunner David Easton. In his presidential address to the American Political Science Association (APSA) in 1969, Easton defined an earlier moment of crisis thus: "Mankind today is working under the pressure of time. Time is no longer on our side… An apocalyptic weapon, an equally devastating population explosion, dangerous pollution of the environment, and in the United States, severe internal dissension of racial and economic origin… move toward increasing social conflict and deepening fears and anxieties about the future, not of a generation or a nation, but of the human race itself."[50] Easton called on his colleagues for "relevance and action," which I believe, taking recent circumstances into account, should inspire some of us today.

Second, we should cast our net widely. On this score, we were admonished by another forerunner, Karl Deutsch. In his presidential address to the APSA in 1970, Deutsch stipulated that "The overwhelming fact of our time is change…" To deal with it, Deutsch insisted that political scientists should consult changes in "population, economic life, cultural and social practices … [in which case we must collect data] from economics, demography, sociology, psychology, and psychiatry.

Regardless of their disciplinary origin, such data are becoming crucial for political analysis … Not a marginal extension of political analysis … [but] inseparable from its core and essence."[51] Deutsch was right, I think, to call for widening our horizons. In later chapters, I will extend his plea for judgment based on far-flung data – i.e., casting a wide knowledge net – with a Temple of Science metaphor.

Third, political scientists should work hard to preserve whatever commendable principles and practices the country already enjoys. We cannot afford to believe that, in a dangerous era, those are safe and will take care of themselves. This point is made by Timothy Snyder, who warns against assuming that progress is "inevitable,"[52] as Francis Fukuyama did in 1989 when the Soviet Union was beginning to collapse, and when America seemed, to Fukuyama, the obvious precursor to worldwide liberalism and democracy.[53]

If progress is not inevitable, say modern sages, backsliding is entirely possible, as from democracy in the German Weimar Republic to dictatorship in the German Third Reich.[54] It follows that caution and conscious commitment should be our watchwords. As Mounk says, "… we retain the power to win a better future. But unlike fifteen or thirty years ago, we can no longer take that future for granted."[55]

Consulting Great Thinkers

Hollywood awards Oscars for best supporting actors and actresses. We should keep that in mind because, in times of great public stress, such as in the Age of Populism, great thinkers from the past can stand by our sides and offer large and useful political thoughts.[56] On this score, we should recall a somber message of the Nobel Prize winner (literature, 1980), Polish poet and diplomat Czeslaw Milosz. In *The Captive Mind* (1953), Milosz described how he lived through Nazi devastations in wartime Poland and experienced Communist brutality behind the Iron Curtain. Thereafter, he hoped that East Europeans would cope successfully with circumstances

that had shattered conventional, traditional, and long-standing political assumptions, institutions, and practices.

What Milosz meant was that hard times call for inspiration from large political ideas – such as the concept of republican virtue, the principle of checks and balances, and the imperative of separating Church and State – many of which come down to us from previous ages of crisis, such as the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment. As the Cold War got under way, however, he assumed that American thinkers would little help their European counterparts on this score, because he judged that Americans, living in a fairly stable society, lacked the imagination to grasp what must be done when normal politics collapse.[57]

Times have changed since Milosz wrote, and many Americans now understand that life in their country has gone seriously awry. Therefore, although Milosz did not think that New Worlders had much to offer, I believe that American political scientists are capable of responding effectively to the current crisis, of turning to cardinal political issues, and of being mindful that standard academic concepts – animating a good deal of social science as usual – can sometimes fragment our experiences and deny big-picture inspiration.[58]

The bottom line to all this, which I will later explain more fully, is that at least some of us should go beyond routine political inquiry and regard first-order political ideas, such as those of thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Jefferson, Hamilton, Madison, Mill, Marx, Weber, Dewey, Orwell, Arendt, and Rawls, more as live issues than as, so often recently, mainly grist for academic exercises.[59]

The point is simple. Many first-order thinkers, in their times, dealt with change. They were surrounded by change, worried by change, buffeted by change, challenged by change. I don't suppose they got everything right. But they knew what their problems were, more or less. As William Butler Yeats observed after World War I, with perfect rhetorical pitch, "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold."[60] And that is where we are now, riveted by a unique president in the Age of Populism.

Neoliberalism

A final postulate is in order. I intend to propose a project for political scientists. To that end, I will later explain why I think some of my colleagues should have a special care for the destructive side of creative destruction. Various commentators, some of whom I noted earlier, agree that populism is generated by people suffering from change. What I will add to their view is that much of that suffering flows from economic destruction, which is sometimes regarded as inevitable but which, I believe, should not be accepted as such.

Along these lines, I will eventually insist that the chief danger to American politics and public life, the larger peril, is not populism but its source, which is a national commitment to unlimited change, sometimes called economic growth, via the process of creative destruction. That commitment appears in certain modern practices of free enterprise, or capitalism, often known as *neoliberalism*. In this sense, *populism* is the *effect*, but *neoliberalism* is the *cause*. Therefore, if the damages of neoliberalism can be mitigated, I believe that populism will subside at least somewhat. In which case, fortunately for all of us, its impact on modern politics will wane.

I will have much more to say about neoliberalism. For the moment, however, let us get underway by considering what is happening in political science nowadays, even before some members of that discipline will consider taking on a new professional responsibility.