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Expertise ed epistemologia politica

by Gerardo Ienna, Flavio D'Abramo and Massimiliano Badino (eds.) (2022) Milano, Meltemi Editore, 306 pp.

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The title of this publication does little to conceal its content: nine contributions (and an exhaustive introduction) that investigate the role of experts from an epistemological-political perspective, through history (Baracca), proposals for theoretical redefinition (Omodeo and Meisner; Badino; Volonté; Raffaetà, Agnelli and Martini), analysis of authors and literature (Putignano; Mattozzi; Moir and Wolfe), and case studies (Caselli). But what is meant by political epistemology within this collection? And how is expertise framed by political epistemology?

For the editors, political epistemology is a discipline defined by the unavoidable intertwining of philosophical-scientific theories, social phenomena, and political practices (D'Abramo and Ienna, p. 8), and therefore very suitable to critically examine the political use of scientific knowledge, as well as the pivotal role played by expertise, who serves as one of the main mediators between expert knowledge, here mostly related to scientific knowledge production, and its applications (D'Abramo and Ienna, p. 7). Not differently, going through the chapters, we read that political epistemology specifies the ideological implications of meta-discourses on science (Omodeo and Meisner, p. 58), that it studies the connections between science, politics and power structures (Putignano, p. 73), that it renders intelligible the consequences of certain approaches to reality on the political level (Raffaetà, Agnelli and Martini, p. 222), that it has as its object the political dimension of knowledge, studying the relationship between the forms of the true and the just, and recognising the political nature of this relationship (Caselli, p. 249). Mattozzi (p. 178) and Moir and Wolfe (p. 291), that refer respectively to STS and feminist studies, also trace these specific theoretical positions back to the study of the relationship between science and politics. Political epistemology is then the perspective underlying each essay, and a function of the theoretical references used by the different authors.

At the same time, expertise is gradually being defined as a property attributed to those who direct scientific knowledge and technological interventions toward their application, thus positioning themselves between scientific and social values (D'Abramo and Ienna, p. 7). It is implied in every proposition placed in prescriptive contexts that claims to describe (supposed) states of affairs indicating something to be done in a specific way (Caselli, pp. 250-251). Expertise is then an essentially contested property (Volonté, p. 154), put into crisis any time it's

questioned its ability to intervene in situations of common interest, i.e., beyond specific disciplinary domain. The expert, therefore, finds herself playing a dual role, epistemic and political (Badino, p. 109), and even if she is the repository of knowledge at a non-common level, her recognition as such depends on historically given forms of social organization (Baracca, p. 137).

Given these definitions of political epistemology and expertise, it is worth articulating the reasons that make the latter a privileged object of study of the former. On the one hand, the expert is the one who, by definition, moves from the epistemic to the political level. On the other hand, this same ability is debated: how and why is it recognized, by whom, is it an epistemic or political property? There is, then, a third link between political epistemology and expertise. If through expertise we could measure the ideological load of knowledge, through the credit or discredit enjoyed by experts, we could also measure the public's reception to scientific discourse, ranging from the extreme of radical doubt to that of uncritical and dogmatical belief (D'Abramo and Ienna, p. 9). In this sense, in several essays (Omodeo and Meisner; Badino; Volonté; Mattozzi; Raffaetà, Agnelli and Martini) the contemporary crisis of the expert is mentioned, with various references to post-truth and the widespread scepticism towards official science characterising large portions of our societies. One of the issues that emerges in this regard is the question of how far the same critical tools developed in epistemological-political studies could be responsible for this scepticism. With the so-called "post-truth", we would be confronted with the perverse effects of a critical action that has gone "too far", making a positive scientific foundation for political decision-making impracticable: to keep unmasking interests and actors who instrumentalise science to legitimize themselves, would eventually erase any stable and shared ground for channelling action, leaving room just for authoritarian decision-making. On a philosophical level, it can be seen as the tension between a trans-historical truth, of which science would be the bearer, and the processes of historicization of scientific knowledge. A historical epistemology is in fact a condition for a political epistemology, because a-historical demarcation criteria can only divert from an analysis of the productive, social and cultural, structures that innervate scientific practices (D'Abramo and Ienna, p. 11). The intention here is not to simplify highly articulated theories to the point of making them coincide with what is now termed "post-truth"; rather to underline that one of the issues debated in the volume is how to distinguish between these theories and post-truth stances. In some of these essays (Omodeo and Meisner; Raffaetà, Agnelli and Martini) there are in fact attempts to break out of the relativism-constructivism / scientism-positivism dichotomy, bearing in mind, however, that these attempts take sides within a theoretical framework that, at least historically, tends towards the first of the two poles. For Omodeo and Meisner, for instance, this dichotomy clearly emerges within the opposite positions of positivist and post-modern approaches, nevertheless this opposition is only the surface effect of the dynamics of capitalism, which neither position challenges (or questions). In Raffaetà, Agnelli and Martini it would instead be a matter of emphasising the creative character of science, which is indeed constructive, but of reality.

It is perhaps at this junction that STS scholars have the opportunity to make their conceptual toolkit resonate with that of other theoretical frameworks present in the book. This can be seen in Volonté's essay, which in some ways proposes an argumentative path to be read in parallel with Badino's, whereby certain expertise's contradictions could be resolved by distin-

guishing between knowledge produced within specific scientific-disciplinary perimeters and its application in open contexts, which by their very nature question the expert. Mattozzi then directly addresses an alleged responsibility of the STS in the crisis of expertise, going back to the Science Wars diatribe (a point also touched upon by Raffaetà, Agnelli and Martini, pp. 222-223) and to the reasoning that was developed about this controversy by authors such as Latour, Collins and Evans. If the relationship between technoscience and politics has always been at the centre of STS – ideally one can consider Sheila Jasanoff's seminal *The Fifth Branch* (1990) as the first systematic investigation with this specific focus – the authors cited by Mattozzi are among the most useful for those who, from an STS perspective, would seek theoretical comparisons with the other essays present in *Expertise ed epistemologia politica*. Collins and Evans have dealt at length with the topic of expertise and the political use of scientific knowledge, from *Rethinking Expertise* (2007) to *Why Democracies Need Science* (2017). The centrality of expertise is also addressed in *Politics of Nature* (2004a), by Bruno Latour, where the expert plays a key role in the bicameral constitution that would structure modernity:

The subtlety of this organization rests entirely on the power given to those who can move back and forth between the houses. The small number of handpicked experts, for their part, presumably have the ability to speak (since they are humans), the ability to tell the truth (since they escape the social world, thanks to the asceticism of knowledge), and, finally, the ability to bring order to the assembly of humans by keeping its members quiet (since the experts can return to the lower house in order to reform the slaves who lie chained in the room) (Latour 2004a, 14).

Latour is also the author of a well-known article (Latour 2004b) that, as noted by Mattozzi (p. 174), is considered to be a paradigmatic self-critic for what has already been pointed out in this review, i.e., the implications of critical approaches on the spread of a destructive scepticism. Following this article by Latour, critical approaches were considered, perhaps improperly, almost antithetical to an STS stance. *Expertise ed epistemologia politica* could work as a check point on this instance, confronting the state of critical thinking and STS, and how they both have internalized part of this debate.

The book's merit is, in fact, to give a state of the art of the debate around expertise, by offering a multi-disciplinary overview and suggesting that political epistemology, like historical epistemology on the other hand, is configured as a meta-framework within which different theoretical perspectives are placed. In particular, historical materialism and feminism are represented: the former by mobilising its analytical tools to read relations of production and domination within the contemporary science-politics field (Omodeo and Meisner; Baracca; Caselli); the latter by questioning the assumptions and subjects behind the construction of scientific knowledge (Putignano), but also as a case in itself to re-read critically the ontological turn that involved all the theoretical frameworks mentioned, STS included (Moir and Wolfe). From this point of view, it would have been interesting to have at the end of the volume a few pages dedicated to a synoptic comparison of the different epistemological-political takes made in the various essays: see for instance the conclusive reasoning about expertise and epistemic authority by Badino (p. 131) and the one by Volonté's (pp. 167-169). Finally, the volume

works as a collector of contemporary Italian interest that renews a long-standing history of studies in political epistemology and expertise (Pellizzoni 2011; Ienna 2023, pp. 297-344). It's a history worth re-visiting, not least because it carries the legacy of a tradition where theoretical discourse has thrived and evolved through active engagement in the praxis of specific social and environmental justice struggles (see Baracca, in this same volume). The essays such as those proposed by this collection could orient these experiences toward new frontiers of inquiry. To give just one example: the conditions of contemporary research in the university, increasingly determined by Impact and Third Mission evaluation parameters, offer a field of application to test and refine the analytical tools of any theory pertaining to political epistemology.

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