

Democracy and Expertise¹

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Democracy and expertise are seemingly well compatible with each other—since both are basic expectations against present political systems—but taking a closer look at them, we can see that they pose, in a sense, opposite requirements: while democracy presupposes a kind of equality, in the case of expertise some degree of inequality is unavoidable. Thus, if one wants to enforce the requirements of both democratic participation and expertise based decision making, these will likely clash with each other.

This does not mean, however, that the conflict between democracy and expertise is a key topic in the literature of theory of democracy. This relationship was mostly either not problematized or it seemed unproblematic to reconcile them. My thesis is, however, that in the second half of the 20th century, the problem of democracy and expertise appears in several actual political questions explicitly or implicitly.

In this paper I analyze the conflicts between democratic authorization and expertise. First I sketch a model of democracy which can be used for this purpose. Then I discuss the requirements that should be fulfilled for a peaceful coexistence of democracy and expertise. Third, I analyze the processes which result or can result in a conflict between the two.

Real existing democracy

To discuss the relationship between democracy and expertise, we need a concept of democracy. But when defining democracy, we face the problem of what kind of normative requirements we use. Both too much idealism and too much opportunism could result in an unusable concept. For the purpose of this paper, too idealist criteria would not be suitable because I endeavor to study the relationship between democracy and expertise in present democratic systems; thus, it is presupposed that there exist feasible criteria of democracy. On the other hand, I discuss the conflicts between the two concepts, and if democracy were defined in a too opportunistic way, it would be hard to speak about the conflict between democratic criteria and expertise.

I use a definition of democracy which is similar to Philippe C. Schmitter's concept of "Real Existing Democracy" (Schmitter 2011).² Schmitter relates his concept to Robert Dahl, and my criteria are also akin to Dahl's approach. Of course, the following definition does not

² Real Existing Democracy in Schmitter has three characteristics: „(1) it calls itself democratic; (2) it is recognized by other self-proclaimed democracies as being 'one of them', and (3) most political scientists applying standard procedural criteria would code it as democratic.” (Schmitter 2011: 399)

claim to be a universal one, but it is set in accordance with the aims of this study. I use the following points to characterize democracy.

- First, by democracy I mean representative democracy. This is a controversial point, because participative democracy is often regarded as a better form, and thus representation would be only a provisional solution. In present political systems, however, representative democracy seems to be indispensable; therefore, if our aim is to characterize real existing democracy, we have to take it as starting point. Of course, it is usually supplemented by the institution of referendum.
- Basic requirements are the universal and equal suffrage and secret ballots, and the periodical elections.
- Also a basic point is the alternatives which can be voted. It is widely held that forming alternatives and putting them on the agenda are nowadays not a bottom-up process initiated by the voters, but they are created by parties or other influential organizations, of course, continually scanning the preferences of the voters.³ This statement is, however, too close to the opportunistic side and needs some supplement. A suitable solution can be Dahl's criteria of the openness of alternatives scheduled: "Any member who perceives a set of alternatives, at least one of which he regards as preferable to any of the alternatives scheduled, can insert his preferred alternative(s) among those scheduled for voting." (Dahl 2006: 70) Of course, there raises the question of how a simple citizen can succeed in scheduling a new alternative. Anyway, there is a chance to insert a new alternative among those scheduled by the parties, for example, by civil movements, establishing a new party, or by initiating a referendum.
- It is also important that the voters know what program the parties endeavor to realize in case of winning the election. There are theoretical debates about the concreteness of the program of which realization the voters authorize the parties. However, it can be said that a degree of knowledge about it is required, and it is an unreal assumption that the winner is authorized with a blank check.
- Next question is what relationship exists between citizens and representatives, parties or government. The most important is here what kind a control citizens have over representatives. The recall of elected representatives is very rare; the citizen's control is thus usually restricted to the periodical elections. If so, the transparency of the governance

³ Dahl, for example, speaks of alternatives scheduled, leaving the question open, who has scheduled it (Dahl 2006: 67ff.).

is needed for the citizens to be able to judge the performance of the government.⁴ Transparency, thus, can be regarded as a basic requirement of present democracies. It is not only a theoretical assumption but usually part of the national and international law.

- In the light of these requirements, the first criterion, that is, the equality of voting rights, needs some supplement. Citizens can be regarded as equal if they have equal chances to get the information needed for the fulfillment of these requirements. For example, they can equally judge whether there exists any further, better alternative besides the scheduled ones, what can be the consequences of the party programs, and they must equally be able to judge the performance of the government.

All of these are not meant to be a complete set of criteria. To qualify democracies we should include further requirements. But I think these points roughly describe the normative requirements of present democracies and are thus suitable for our research aim. On the one hand, they do not consist of unrealizable requirements; on the other hand, they cannot be regarded solely as description of the status quo, since one can find claims or criticism based on them.

Democracy and expertise: a peaceful coexistence

Although the topic of my paper is the conflict between democracy and expertise, and I argue that this is one of the most important challenges for democracy today, the literature on democracy usually does not thematize this question (Turner 2003: 2). It is evident, however, that expertise plays a crucial role in modern societies. It is thus worth first to examine what requirements must be fulfilled to avoid the conflict between democracy and expertise, while both are basic factors in present society.

The first condition is that political and scientific questions must be clearly separable; that is, the debates based on interests or values and the territory of objective truth must be separated from each other. This separation is, on the one hand, an epistemological question: one holds that some questions can be solved objectively, and these questions constitute the object of science. We need, however, more than this: not only the objective and subjective terrains must be separable, but the activities, professions connecting to them have to

⁴ It is usually distinguished between mandate and accountability theory. According to the first voters authorize representatives to execute a concrete program, while according to the second politicians act freely, and they will be judged by the voters on the next election (Manin et al. 1999, Körösnéyi–Sebök 2012). Here we do not need to decide this dilemma, since the requirement of transparency is necessary for both models.

differentiate from each other. For example, scientists do not manipulate—intentionally or not—their research results, and politicians do not influence research projects and their publication.

The second condition connects to the elections. According to the above democracy-model, during the elections citizens vote candidates or parties whose programs are the closest to their preferences. To do this, however, they need a kind of competence; that is, they have to be able to judge what effects party programs may have. To get such competence, it is necessary for the citizens to rely on experts' knowledge.⁵ And these expert advices, again, must be objective and impartial.

According to the above model of democracy, citizen competence is needed to judge the performance of the government as well. For example they must be able to decide whether the government has chosen the best tool to reach its aims, or whether the failure is attributable to the government or to external factors. To judge these questions, citizens also have to rely on expert knowledge.

To sum up, if we accept the above—both realistic and normative—model of democracy, and also accept that in modern society special expert knowledge is needed to judge several political questions, then there is a need for a kind of division of labor between experts and citizens: both of them do their own business, that is, citizens vote, experts gather knowledge and disseminate it, while their activities are interdependent, as far as citizens need expert knowledge to judge rightly, and experts—among other things—help to realize policies chosen by citizens.⁶

Blurring borders

Defining epochs in the history of democracy and expertise is a dangerous endeavor because it can easily be oversimplifying. I think, however, we can put forward the view that from the beginning of modernity to the 20th century, scientific and political questions were mainly separated, and that the two terrains co-existed relatively harmoniously. The Enlightenment's

⁵ According to the prevailing solution—says Dahl—citizen competence stems from more source, i.e. education, media, and information provided by the parties (Dahl 1992: 48). He does not mention expertise, but all sources have to be based on it more or less.

⁶ The idea of division of labor stems from Dewey. His thought can be regarded as the first formulation of the problem of democracy and expertise. His polemic with Walter Lippmann is one of the most important reference points in this topic even today (Brown 2009: 135). According to Dewey the solution to the problem of democracy and expertise is the division of labor between them: scientists define the basic social needs and problems, while citizen choose a solution among them in a democratic process. Of course, further requirements must be fulfilled to achieve this (Fischer 2000: 7).

ideal of science and progress regarded the scientists' profession as an activity that is objective, free from political interests, and contributes to the progress of society. According to Anthony Giddens, modernity is based on trust in science and expertise (Giddens 1991: 88 ff., cited by Stilgoe et al. 2006: 20). Politics relied on the performance of science, which helped to develop a lot of institutions and services of modern state. The state—to a more or less extent—financed and organized scientific research. This, however, was not a political control over science; scientist did not depend on politicians; science—in spite of the often relevant financial support—was independent (Nowotny 2000: 7–11; Fischer 2009: 18–20).

This situation changed in the second half of the 20th century, which change was attributable to more, probably interdependent factors. The first aspect of this change is that the clear separability of the two terrains—politics and science, or subjective judgment and objective knowledge—has become questionable. There are a lot of works in philosophy of science or sociology of science that contest the objectivity of science, and claim that scientific theories and their acceptance is partly attributable to social factors. The first important reference point is here Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* in 1962 (Kuhn 1970, comp. Schudson 2006: 493). There are a lot of approaches belonging to this trend, for example, constructivism, strong program of sociology of knowledge, sociology of scientific knowledge, postmodern, or science, technology and society studies. The great number of the new schools does not mean that this approach is the mainstream of philosophy of science. A lot of scientists criticize them for relativism or for depriving science of objectivity. The sharpest manifestation of this debate was the Science Wars in the nineties. Independently of the result of this debate, what is interesting here is that the universal, objective, value-neutral, and context-independent ideal of science has lost its stability, and the authority of science or experts has been remarkably eroded. It is common that we hear criticisms from politicians, from the public, or from other experts that certain expert opinions or scientific results are not well grounded, intentionally distorted, or false owing to the narrow-minded methodology. This kind of contesting expert opinions is almost regular in questions like financial crises, ecological problems, or epidemics.

Besides these relativist tendencies in philosophy of science or sociology of science, other factors have also contributed to the loss of authority of science and expertise. First of all, the belief that science has clearly positive effects was questioned. In the second half of the 20th century, there was a growing criticism against modern science, claiming that scientific activities have harmful or catastrophic effects. As a consequence, scientist lost their respect: they were not regarded any more as persons working exclusively for the progress of society.

But not only threatening catastrophes can erode the authority of science. The fact that political questions have been much more complex may in itself result in questioning of expert opinions. In the case of clear and simple questions, it is much more probable that after debating the opinions one of them wins, and thus we can speak of truth. Most of present political questions are, however, so complex that one can always argue for the opposite standpoint, and one can always find reputable experts in all opposed camps. In the public this can lead to the erosion of expertise: if there is no scientific consensus on a question, the standpoints of experts are influenced by other, non-scientific factors—may the people think. It is probable that when the problems are complex and the uncertainty surrounding them is higher, the border between science and politics becomes vaguer, because experts cannot answer these questions without any doubt (Carolan 2006: 663).

Conflicts between democracy and expertise

In what follows I examine what kind conflicts emerge or may emerge between democracy and expertise in the light of the social and scientific changes outlined above.

The first problem is that today it is hard to define what falls within the competence of politics, that is, what questions should be solved by democratic decision making. Previously politicians did not want to intervene in the functioning of science, mainly because the performance of science was regarded as beneficial. But if science is seen as having harmful and perhaps catastrophic effects, there emerges the claim to intervene in scientific research. If certain technologies—e.g., nuclear technology or genetics—affect or threaten the life of citizens, then according to democratic self-determination, it seems to be a just claim to control them. As a result several technologies are prohibited or restricted. But on the other hand, it is also often said that a populist attitude hides behind these prohibitions: decision makers endeavor to serve the misguided crowd. People should only be enlightened and understand technologies, and they would not demand these prohibitions. Thus, a conflict between democracy and expertise emerges: different results would follow from democratic decision making and expert advice.

Another problematic point is the delegation of power to expert committees, that is, when a public policy task is not executed by the government itself but by an expert committee, which is created by the government but usually functions independently of it. Delegation means that certain policy issues or whole policy areas are transferred from the competence of government to the competence of experts, that is, a kind of de-politicization.

On the one hand, there are criticisms stating that delegation is non-effective and anti-democratic (Schoenbrod 2005); on the other hand, delegation in some cases seems to be unavoidable.

The next conflict between democracy and expertise stems from the representative character of democratic government. Since in representative democracy the election is nearly the only occasion when citizens can influence the course of politics, it is important that they can choose among every possible alternative. As we have noted above, the normative requirement ensuring this is the openness of alternatives, that is, there is nothing to prevent scheduling a new alternative. There are, however, tendencies against this. On the one hand, because of the growing complexity of political questions, it is harder and harder to say that all possible alternatives are scheduled. On the other hand, because of the mentioned loss of authority of experts, people do not trust in experts defining possible alternatives. As a result, citizens often think that the alternatives scheduled are selected ones. And not the selection itself is the main problem—because it is probably inevitable—but who selects. Not only in the public opinion but also in scientific literature one can find views that scheduled alternatives are selected by political, economic, or scientific elites. For example, Herbert Marcuse and the early Habermas regarded science as a tool to serve the interest of capitalists: the scientific-technical worldview, under the mask of objectivity, reduces the alternatives and eliminates the anti-capitalist ones (Marcuse 1991; Habermas 1969, 1973).

But not only such radical views state that science reduces the alternatives. Peter Hall, applying Kuhn's concept of paradigm to describe economic policy, speaks of policy paradigms. A main character of these paradigms is that they reduce the range of accepted economic policy tools, while their emergence and stabilization were not only influenced by scientific factors, but by social ones as well (Hall 1993).

And the last point I discuss refers to the process of policy making. In democracy, one can find a democratically elected government, which—let us suppose—has won its mandate in an informative campaign, that is, the voters knew what program they vote. Thus, the government feels itself entitled to execute its program, and later, in the next election, the citizens will judge its performance. But this policy making won't be undisturbed. Not only the opposition will monitor and criticize its decision, but a lot of other actors, like civil organizations, national and international experts with great reputation. These experts, as opposed to the government, do not have any democratic authorization, although they often seem to be right.

This case is different from the ones discussed above: while expertise was there a factor restricting or threatening democratic self-governance, here expertise is a factor that may help to correct a governmental policy, which may be based on an error or disinforming the voters. The continuous monitoring can thus mean an expansion of democracy, a correction of representative democracy. John Keane regards monitory democracy as a new epoch of democracy (after assembly and representative democracy), where a lot of actors, like civil organizations, journalists, experts, or bloggers continuously monitor and evaluate the performance of the government (Keane 2009, 2011).

Summary

The conflicts described above are not only theoretical ones, but one can find them in everyday political life as well. These conflicts, however, often emerge as conflicts between representative and participatory democracy. In general, the urging of participative and deliberative elements is a key component of present discussion or criticism of democracy. My argument is that some of the present problems of democracy can be interpreted as conflicts between democracy and expertise, and by so doing, these problems take a different form than in the case of participatory claims. There are approaches emphasizing that the next step or development of democracy will not or should not be participation but something different. One them is John Keane's already mentioned concept of monitory democracy, which, he emphasizes, is not equal to participation. Keane does not emphasize the importance of expertise, but we can add: the more expertise based the monitory activities are, the more legitimacy they may gain. Another example is the so-called "third wave of science studies". Harry Collins and Robert Evans distinguish between three waves of science studies. The first was based on the authority of science; the second eroded and questioned this authority by participative efforts. This second wave, however, generated a new problem: we do not know when we need expertise. The third wave endeavors to solve this problem; that is, it brings back expertise against participatory tendencies (Collins and Evans 2002). Of course, on the basis of these examples one cannot state that the key concept of democracy theory is expertise instead of participation, but a trend towards the growing importance of expertise and toward the correction of simple participatory claims perhaps can be observed.

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