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ABSTRACT FRAMING SESSION - WEDNESDAY 20TH JANUARY 2021

Not just the facts: A political theory of trust in expertise

Sheila Jasanoff (Harvard Kennedy School)

The coronavirus year of 2020 highlighted global society's extreme dependence on expertise at the same time that it revealed persistent and significant gaps in society's understanding of the foundations of expert credibility and legitimacy. The most mundane conventions of daily life – whom to see, when to shop, where to travel, how to greet friends or family, whether to send children to school – suddenly became topics of state regulation, and behind each intrusive rule stood the anonymous authority of expertise. In some nations, public health expertise took on a name and face, often a lightning rod for controversy, as with Drosten in Germany, Fauci in the United States, Ferguson in Britain or Raoult in France. In other nations, health experts remained behind the scenes, just as most economists did, but their role in making and implementing pandemic rules was no less far-reaching. For the best part of a year, the social world as we knew it was dissolved and remade on the strength of expert guidance. The world was governed, in effect, by expertise.

As the pandemic recedes, many will ask how effectively the experts governed us, and lengthy debates are sure to play out about the right measures of success and failure. Was it the accuracy of predictions, the steepness of death rates, the intensity of surges, the distributive effects of disease, the effects of lockdowns, or the speed and shape of economic recovery? In this talk, however, my focus is on the political legitimacy of expertise. What made societies accept or reject rule by experts, and how in the future can those same societies ensure that the legitimacy of expertise is attended to along with its efficacy? How, in short, can we amend our conventional theories of democracy in the light of a yearlong experience of social disruption resting on the recommendations of unelected, largely invisible, and mostly non-accountable technocrats?

I will draw on two strands of research in proposing a framework for assessing the legitimacy of public health expertise. The first is a body of research in science and technology studies looking at the moves through which policy advisers shore up their epistemic authority, enabling them to present judgment as fact. These include familiar techniques of boundary work, classification, commensuration, and performance. The second is a large, cross-national, comparative study, co-led with Stephen Hilgartner, that examines how knowledge practices interacted with civic epistemologies to produce more and less robust policy-relevant claims in some 15 countries. Together, these bodies of work lay the foundation for a political theory that illuminates how, in contemporary democracies, the right of the few to know for the many supports and is supported by the right of the few to govern the many.

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