



# **BVPS**

**Blog da Biblioteca Virtual do Pensamento Social**

## **SYMPOSIUM**

### **SOCIAL WORLD AND PANDEMIC**

Edited by

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**1. Sociologists and social scientists in general seem mobilized to interpret the social and political impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Is sociological theory up to the challenge of understanding and explaining the phenomenon?**

There are multiple problems here, and different things to understand and explain. I will focus on one. The extraordinary feature of this situation is the failure of experts to predict the epidemiological consequences of the virus. Right up to the moment when the numbers exploded in Europe, and following that in New York and a few other places in the US, experts were dismissing it. When it became clear that there would be significant loss of life, they employed models that wildly overstated the likely effects. This put the spotlight on modelling – and its limitations. But it also pointed up the fact that this was a multidisciplinary problem, and that there were no experts who could make authoritative pronouncements on all aspects of the problem: the virology, the epidemiology, the public policy needed, and so forth. Indeed, there were disagreements and complete confusion over the basic facts about how the virus was actually transmitted from person to person, and continuing confusion over how it killed and what therapies were effective.

For the last twenty years, debates have been going on in sociology, and particularly sociological science studies, about expertise and about the creation of ignorance. We know a lot about the social construction of



problems and scientific facts, and we can understand how the process of creating experts and expert facts works. We also know a lot about the ways in which states and democracies deal with claims of experts. In particular we have good work on the very different ways in which expertise interacts with different national bureaucratic and political traditions, mostly focused on the US, Germany, and Great Britain. The differences in the way these countries reacted ran true to type: stakeholders led by the bureaucracy in Germany, delegation to a key figure in Britain, and diverse experiments by different jurisdictions in the federal system of the US, leading to a focus on best practices.

## **2. How can your research area contribute to examining different dimensions of the phenomenon?**

Much of my research relates to expertise—how it is organized, the social relations it depends on, its role in politics, and problems that arise when problems are ill-formed—dependent on different expert considerations and where there is no solution that is optimal from all or even many of the relevant points of view.

This kind of research is retrospective, but it can therefore be concerned with expert failure, which has potential value in designing institutions that would be better at facing new expert problems. But planning for the next expert failure is like planning for the next war on the basis of experiences with the last one: it often fails. Nevertheless, the current pandemic will provide future analysts with an extraordinary range of different cases, with different policies, different expert-politics relations, and different organizational structures dealing with the problems of knowledge and policy involved.

## **3. Is the pandemic provoking deep social, political and cultural changes? Or is it speeding up trends of change already underway? If so, is it possible to glimpse the contours of post-pandemic societies?**

Here again, the problem of experts and their relation to politics and policy looms large. The pandemic shows, paradoxically, our deep dependence on expert knowledge—no real decision-making was possible without experts—and the fact that it is not possible to merely rely on experts, or “listen to the science.” Advice must be judged and the limitations of expertise must be assessed case by case, model by model, various conflicting expert claims



synthesized, and policy and implementation must be carried out, respecting democratic judgement and discussion, and with a sense of democratic accountability. New forms of social organization need to respond to new forms or expertise and new expert problems. Whether this will be a learning episode or becomes a political football that reveals fundamental divisions in society over matters of personal autonomy, the role of the state, and similar problems is the great unknown at this point. But regardless, what has changed is this: knowledge issues have become central to governance and politics, and are the major problem of modern societies, not, as the Enlightenment thinkers believed, the solution to its problems.

#### 4. What work(s) of Sociology or Social Sciences can help us to comprehend and dialogue about the challenges underway?

Probably the most important text for beginning to think about the problems of expertise is the synthetic work by Roger Koppl, *Expert Failure*, which brings together the sociological science studies literature with the economics literature. He also presents it in a youtube video. Among the sociologists who have contributed in this area, Nico Stehr and Reiner Grundmann have published an overview, *Experts: The Knowledge and Power of Expertise. Key Ideas*. Stehr has edited a series of volumes related to the theme. A series of books by Harry Collins and Robert Evans have articulated a set of definitions of types of “genuine” expertise, and have written a more polemical work on *Why Democracies Need Science*. Sheila Jasanoff has been a public voice on current issues with expertise and the coronavirus, and has done fundamental work on the comparative politics of expertise between the major European countries and the US. There is also a forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Expertise and Democratic Politics*, edited by Gil Eyal and Thomas Medvetz, which provides an overview of multiple issues relating to expertise.

**Stephen Turner** is Distinguished University Professor of Philosophy at the University of South Florida, USA. He has written extensively on expertise, including *Liberal Democracy 3.0: Civil Society in an Age of Experts*, and a collection of essays, *The Politics of Expertise*.



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