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Johan Christensen, Cathrine Holst and Anders Molander: *Expertise, Policy-making and Democracy*

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NOTA BIOGRÁFICA

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ABSTRACT

Review of the book by Johan Christensen, Cathrine Holst and Anders Molander, *Expertise, Policy-making and Democracy*, Routledge, 2023, 136 pp.

KEYWORDS

Expertise; policy-making; democracy; institutional design; epistemic communities.

RESUMEN

Recensión del libro de Johan Christensen, Cathrine Holst y Anders Molander, *Expertise, Policy-making and Democracy*, Routledge, 2023, 136 pp.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Pericia; formulación de políticas; democracia; diseño institucional; comunidades epistémicas.

In *Expertise, Policy-making and Democracy*, Christensen, Holst and Molander (2023) contemplate the role of expertise in policy making and the challenges this raises for democracy in contemporary political systems. The authors discuss how reservations about “experts” and how expertise shapes decision-making is signalled in a range of epistemic and democratic concerns, or “worries”. They acknowledge that while expertise is an essential feature of modern governance, its integration within democratic systems requires careful consideration to counteract threats to political equality and public participation. The authors advocate that this should be explored systemically by deliberating on the broader features of political organisation and societal structures. In an era whereby democratic backsliding, threats to constitutional values, and a rise of populism are increasingly evident, these are pertinent issues to reflect on.

This open access volume is authored by Johan Christensen (Leiden University), Cathrine Holst (University of Oslo) and Anders Molander (Oslo Metropolitan University). They acknowledge that their interpretations about expertise, policy making and democracy are informed by existing arguments in the literature

and their participation in several research projects. A valuable contribution of their scholarship is its interdisciplinary focus that considers the influence of expertise in policy making on democratic principles through a lens of philosophy and political science. In alignment with the authors' research interests, the narrative pays attention to ethical considerations and the role of professionals / epistemic communities in the policy making process. While some international illustrations are provided, the empirical discussions largely focus on expertise and the participation of experts in European Union policy making and Norway in the twenty-first century. The examples include gender, climate and environment, EU institutional procedure and decision making, COVID-19.

This qualitative discussion piece is organised into six chapters and the themes sequence well. Chapter one introduces the main argument in that expertise is both desirable and necessary to inform decision making but that fact also creates challenges for democracy. This arises from the way power is distributed within and outside an epistemic community, and in how tensions can arise between experts' power and democratic legitimacy. This signals how the discussion will be organised to interrogate how "expertise" can responsibly be incorporated into democratic arrangements. The second chapter teases out how and why contemporary democracies depend on knowledge producers and utilise their expertise. In an era of polycrisis and turbulence, the contribution of specialist knowledge and know-how can contribute to informed decision making and better policy making outcomes. But the authors caution that these benefits are contingent on finding the correct balance between experts' power and protecting democratic principles. In an already unequal world, the rule of an expert and undemocratic elite would inevitably have negative implications for political equality and public participation. The authors continue with this theme in chapter three by highlighting the significance of values such as equality, participation and self-government when exploring how expertise may be integrated into democratic systems. This does not suggest abandoning the central role of expertise but that threats to undermining legitimacy and public trust must be avoided.

Chapters four and five explore "worries" about the significant role of experts in policy making from the perspective of epistemic communities and democratic concerns. Epistemic worries raise questions about the quality of policies and decisions, and while valid, they should not result in a rejection of expertise. Rather, more prominence should be given to improving institutional design and how expert bodies function to mitigate apprehensions about expert performance and a perceived lack of political judgement or "literacy". Whereas democratic worries include concerns that the democratic deficits become wider as expert power may be at odds with deliberative processes. This may lead to an alienation of the public as decision making potentially shifts from democratically elected representatives to unelected experts – a stark contrast to ideas that politics should be an expression of the will of the people. The potential repercussions for democratic government include decreased accountability, rule by elites and technocrats, depoliticization of public debate, and generally poorer outcomes.

The concluding chapter presents how institutional arrangements to facilitate as fora for expert advice can be designed and maintained to balance both epistemic and democratic concerns and values. This necessitates an organisational design that embodies a diverse range of perspectives (disciplinary, political, social) and facilitates legitimate citizen participation, education, equality and parliamentary oversight. Further, the democratisation of expertise should not be to the detriment of compromising the quality of expertise provided.

The discussions draw on debates in political theory and relates to existing themes in the contemporary literature, such as studies of knowledge utilisation and policy advisory systems (PAS). Arising from the authors' unpacking of the empirical and normative dimensions of expertise, the book reminds us of the relevance of theories of the public policy process and how many of the concepts and models are underpinned by interpretations of power and influence. Issues such as concerns with quality, management, the diversity of expertise and institutional design are also of interest in a third wave of PAS studies. The role of expert advisory bodies is also noted in the authors' deliberations and how these are important institutional channels for linking science and policy. We are reminded that decision makers rely on expertise and expert advisory bodies in times of crises. The case of COVID-19 – widely discussed in the literature and across institutional settings – is highlighted, as is Brexit, the Global Financial Crisis and the Climate Crisis. Hence, illustrating the paradox of a backlash against the role of experts despite a greater need for expertise. Of further interest is the authors' point about whether expertise and democracy can ever be married, or whether expert arrangements will derail and pervert democracy is contingent on the significance of institutional design. Expertise, policymaking and democracy is across levels of governance and encompasses a wide array of actors and disciplines, reflecting both path dependency and ongoing externalisation trends in the demand and supply of

expertise. This poses challenges for addressing institutional design through a reform of expert arrangements and introducing measures to alleviate both epistemic and democratic concerns effectively.

To conclude, at just over one hundred pages this book is a short but stimulating analysis of the growing role and influence of experts in policy making and the challenges this poses for democratic governance. Graduate students, academics and practitioners of policy making alike will find this book a valuable contribution. It should also appeal to those involved in public affairs and political commentary who wish to immerse themselves more deeply in these debates.

REFERENCES

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