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Authority, Legitimacy and the Expert-Layman problem

Expertise is ubiquitous in contemporary societies. We are epistemically dependent on the knowledge of experts on many different issues. This poses several problems for democracy. Where do the authority and legitimacy of expertise come from? Experts are not elected: they are appointed by governments or recruited by media to give their opinion on important issues such as health, security and environment. Their opinion is preferred to that of the average citizen and is used by governments for prescribing policies that impact the whole society (see the restriction measures taken by most governments during Covid-19). In this chapter, I analyze the role of experts in democracy and the obstacles to their acceptance by the citizens, given that they violate two principles of democracy: neutrality, that is the idea that the State should not prefer a specific opinion on the others, and equality, that is, one person, one vote, independently of their cognitive capacities.

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Expertise is ubiquitous in contemporary societies. The myth of autonomous citizens who can decide on their own how to act has been debunked by the massive reliance we all have on experts and policy makers to know what is good for us in many everyday matters such as which products are safe to consume, which side effects medical drugs may have, when the air is safe to breathe and so on. As Sheila Jasanoff says: “Not only do we, as adult citizens in democratic societies, not know the answers to such questions, but for the most part, we do not know how answers are produced or why we should rely on them. Citizens delegate such issues to unelected policy makers and trust the policy system on the whole to make the right choices”. This poses several problems for democracy. Where does the legitimacy of the experts come from if they are not elected? Why their voice weights more than that of an average citizen? And on which grounds their opinion must be preferred to that of other citizens? I will call these problems: (1) the problem of legitimacy, (2) the problem of equality and (3) the problem of neutrality. I will now present some reflections on these three fundamental problems with respect to the question of expertise in liberal democracies.

Legitimacy and Epistemic Authority

Liberal democracies draw their legitimacy on the voluntary consent to authority. This consent is based on an agreement on the procedures that transfer individual authority to the political authority of the state. In the case of transfer of *epistemic authority*, that is, the authority of knowledge, it is unclear what are the procedures we consent to when we accept a “superior knowledge” should guide our choices. Do we consent to the scientific method as part of the public reasons that make a democracy work? This is a debatable issue. Many authors disagree on this point. Notably, critical theorists have rejected modern science as a tool of domination. Herbert Marcuse (1964) and Jurgen Habermas (1968) have extensively criticized the neutrality of science by arguing that science is an ideology of domination of nature (Marcuse) and of instrumental rationalization (Habermas). According to Marcuse, the scientific method embodies assumptions about the exploitation of nature that shouldn’t be accepted as shareable public reasons. For Habermas, although the kind of domination of nature that is intrinsic in the scientific/technological strategic rationality is an unavoidable feature of *homo faber*, and thus, *contra* Marcuse, cannot be eliminated or replaced by a different science, still the purposive-rational action of the technocratic intention serves as an ideology for the new politics “which is adapted to technical problems and brackets out practical questions”2. The epistemic authority of science is thus based for these authors on a techno-scientific instrumental ideology of the world that doesn’t have a clear legitimacy for the people. Other, even more radical thinkers, such as Paul Feyerabend (1975) have argued that the scientific method is a myth and science is nothing more than an opinion among others. There is no intrinsic legitimacy of a universal method in science and believing in mainstream science is a choice of favoring an opinion that has earned authority thanks to the institutional support of governments that endorse a certain ideology. Although the intersubjectivity, the reproducibility and the verifiability of the methods and the results of science are considered today the ground of legitimacy of science, authors like Feyerabend deny the objectivity of scientific method arguing that the way in which science is funded by governments makes it an ideology deprived of objectivity. These thinkers radically reject the scientific method as an impartial tool for knowledge. But without following the radicality of these positions, other philosophers have argued that there exists a tension between science and democracy: in his 2001 book *Science, Truth and Democracy* Philip Kitcher argues

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that although science promotes some of the liberal values such as transparency, skepticism, and collective problem-solving, it also challenges these values through exclusivism and elitism; it contributes to the wealth and security upon which modern democracy depends and yet it creates technological risks. A new pact between science and democracy must thus be established to understand which scientific procedures can be acceptable for the democratic society. Science’s aim is not only truth: it is significant truth that must be established in a democratic manner.

Thus, if it is not the scientific method alone, but also the values of the society that can legitimate our consent to the epistemic authority of science and expertise, where does the legitimacy of epistemic authority come from? This is an open question that is still discussed in philosophy and sociology of science. The legitimacy of the experts does not depend on the universal legitimacy of the scientific method, rather, it depends on the existence of the widespread belief in a society that the aims, interests and values of citizens are shared by the scientific experts and that these aims, interests and values converge with the overall objectives of the society. Sometimes, interests, aims and values do not converge, and the legitimacy of an expert advice can be challenged. Take the measures taken by various governments in the world during the COVID-19 pandemic to restrain the liberties of citizens to keep under control the spread of the virus. These policies have generated widespread debates on their legitimacy, given that they were apparently in contrast with some basic civil liberties such as autonomy and freedom of movement. There was no knockdown scientific consensus about which policies should have been adopted and different states endorsed different policies sometimes in conflict with part of the population. The legitimacy of these policies did not depend on the epistemic authority of the experts, rather, on the trust in the different governments that endorsed the policies. This shows that the legitimacy of the epistemic authority of the experts is dependent on many factors that are external to the “pure” certainty of their knowledge.

*Equality, democracy and expertise*

Democracy is grounded in a principle of equality: one person, one vote, independently of the social, cultural, and cognitive differences among citizens (except for the limits of age for the vote

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and other exceptional restrictions). The political threat to democracy that expert knowledge poses is that it seems to grant a special class of citizens, the experts, with a form of power that is not under control by the average citizen. As Stephen Turner (2003) puts it: “Expertise is a kind of violation of the conditions of tough equality presupposed by democratic accountability. Some activities, such as genetic engineering, are apparently out of reach of democratic control, even when these activities, because of their dangerous character, ought perhaps to be subject to public scrutiny and regulation, precisely because of imbalance of knowledge. As such, we are faced with the dilemma of capitulation to the “rule of experts” or democratic rule that is “populist”, that valorizes the wisdom of the people even when “the people” are ignorant and operate based on fear and rumor". Although the example of genetic engineering may be debatable, given that it is carried out either with the informed consent of patients or in laboratories, often private, using animal models, expertise seems to violate a principle of equality in accountability that is fundamental for democracy. On the other hand, no democracy could survive without the appeal to expert knowledge in crucial issues such as health, security, new technologies or ecology. A “division of cognitive labor” (Kitcher 1990) is thus essential for a society to thrive. As Turner points out, there is no solution to the problem of equality. A fundamental inequality of knowledge is a condition for epistemic authority: although a democracy may try to fill the knowledge gap through public education, a society of “omni-competent” citizens in which facts are available to everyone is an impossible ideal. The condition of epistemic dependence is part of the human condition and the acceptability of this condition in a democratic society depends on the fairness of procedures of distribution of knowledge and the transparency on the deference cognitive relations between non-experts and experts. While we can be obliged to obey to a legitimate political authority, we cannot be obliged to trust an epistemic authority. Our trust should come from an internal conviction of the superiority of a set of beliefs (the experts’ beliefs) upon our set of beliefs. Epistemic trust implies an acceptance of the surrender of our beliefs to the beliefs of others (Origgi, 2004). This is a choice that must depend on our trust to those to which we surrender our beliefs and cannot be a matter of coercion. Nonetheless, given the strict ties between political authority and epistemic authority in contemporary technoscientific democracies, our trust should be based on public reasons we are able to share with others, and in the case of scientific knowledge these reasons are not “public” in the strict sense

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because their mastery depends on the cognitive competence of a group of citizens (the experts) that are trained to master these reasons. Turner calls the inequality of expert knowledge as the “last inequality”\textsuperscript{5} in our societies that we are not able to eliminate.

**Neutrality**

A distinctive principle of liberalism is the “neutrality principle”, that is, the idea that the State “should not reward or penalize particular conceptions of the “good life”, rather, should provide a neutral framework within which different and potentially conflicting conceptions of the good life can be pursued, rather, should provide a neutral framework within which different and potentially conflicting conceptions of the good can be pursued”\textsuperscript{6}. Grounded in the works of Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill on individualism and autonomy, the principle of neutrality is a milestone of contemporary political liberalism. John Rawls’s theory of justice is commonly thought to be committed to the principle of neutrality through the veil of ignorance, which plays a fundamental role in his argument from the original position\textsuperscript{7}. Given that the parties in the original position are ignorant with respect to their conception of a good life, they will choose the principles of justice in a neutral way, that is, without presupposing any preferred conception of what a good life should be.

The Neutrality principle limits the kinds of arguments which are acceptable in liberal dialogue. "No reason is a good reason if it requires the power holder to assert: (a) that his conception of the good is better than that asserted by any of his fellow citizens, or (b) that, regardless of his conception of the good, he is intrinsically superior to one or more of his fellow citizens."\textsuperscript{8} Do scientific reasons respect the Neutrality Principle? Does the public debate about science-based decision making presuppose that some points of view are “intrinsically superior” to others? Of course, some facts need to be taken for granted for there to be a genuine political discussion. But the establishment of these facts is delegated to those experts whose opinion is “preferred” by the states. In many crucial issues that involve scientific knowledge, facts are established by a faction of experts whose point of view is considered more “objective” by the state compared to the point of view of other experts. This is not due to a malfunctioning of the scientific community, which

\textsuperscript{5} Cf. Turner (2003) cit.
\textsuperscript{7} Cf. Rawls (1971)
\textsuperscript{8} Cf. Ackerman (1980) p. 11
has concepts and procedures such as “expert consensus”, “peer review” that aim at increasing knowledge in an objective way. But states can choose “biased” science to pursue their interests. Morone and Woodhouse (1989), in their work on nuclear power expertise, showed how a scientific community that was bound up with the policy imposed the idea of the safety of nuclear plants based on a consensus that was created in part by dismissing critics as “not real scientists” and imposing heavy educational policies to improve the legitimacy of this point of view in the eye of the public. Scientific facts are never 100% sure and their acceptance by policy makers involves a complex of values, mutual dependence on the opinions of industry or the army, and political preferences.

The legitimacy and authority of scientific expertise, that is, of that part of scientific research that touches citizens’ and states’ interests, are thus controversial, and this creates an atmosphere of distrust and skepticism towards the institutions of knowledge. Although science has its own procedures to guarantee objectivity and universality, when science is recruited by the states to make decisions that impact the citizens’ life it needs a further legitimacy to be accepted by the public.

But are we passive believers towards the experts or do we actively try to find the right experts? Here I want to argue that, given that expertise is not easily perceived as legitimate, people use their cognitive capacities to evaluate expertise and decide whom to trust (Branch-Smith, Origgi 2022).

*Social indicators of trust in experts*

Information is everywhere. Given the new technologies, the answer to every question is at few clicks of distance. False and true information are both easy to reach. The main problem of the growth of misinformation is that people do not have access to the reliability of the sources they can find on Internet. The gap between experts and non-experts lies in the incapacity of the non-expert to recognize the trustworthiness of a source of information. A website for climate change deniers can resemble to the official website of the IPCC. Yet, people use heuristics and strategies to check the validity of the expertise by browsing the social information that surrounds a piece of content found in the media or online. I will call *social indicators of trust* the social information
people extract about an expert to assess their trustworthiness in absence of any detailed knowledge of the content of the expertise.

Authority is a powerful indicator of trust. The authority of an expert depends on their past records that a layman can find online by searching with Google Scholar the publications of the expert and their H-index, that is, the index that measures the impact of the publications. This social information is available in the online environment and easy to process.

Status is the position of the expert in a hierarchy. The layman can check the status of the expert by looking at their role in an institution and the recognition they have within the scientific community.

Influence is the exposure of the expert on the media and social networks. A layman can check the media presence of the expert and look at whom follows the expert on social media like Twitter, to assess the influence of the expert.

Values are also important for the public to come to trust an expert. If an expert shares the values of the public, they have more credibility. Values can be checked by looking at public statements of the expert. An expert whose statements don’t align with the values of the community has less chance to be believed. There are epistemic values shared by the scientific community, like replicability of experiments and norms against plagiarism, and non-epistemic values, that is, general values that a community holds, like freedom or solidarity.

How reliable are these social indicators? To maximize the rationality of our use of social information, an exercise in metacognition could be useful. We may combine these different social indicators and see whether a coherent picture of the expert emerges. A certain balance among the indicators should be a criterion for a good reputation of an expert. If, for example, an expert ranks high in influence, but low in authority, we may infer that they are able to use the social media to influence other people’s behavior without being a certified expert by their peers.

People are not blind trustors: they check the reputation of the experts by using the social information available to them. The problem of trust in experts depends on the quality of the social information that surrounds the experts. “Who says what about whom” is the key ingredient to come to trust an expert, and the gap between experts and non-experts is where misinformation thrives. The gap is the “space” where the authority is claimed: charlatans or ill-intentioned informants may claim pseudo-authority on some evidence and redirect the public towards alternative authorities. The gap between experts and non-experts is not limited to the gap of
knowledge about the content of expertise, that is irreconcilable given the specialization of knowledge; it is about the reputation of the expert that people actively search and that can be distorted by the information pollution that surrounds what it is said about the expert.

The information deluge that characterizes our societies comes with a price: everyone can claim authority over a piece of information and present themselves as legitimate source of information. That is why using social indicators of trust is indispensable to filter the reliable sources of information. People need to assess the reputation of an expert available to avoid false information. Of course, reputations may be misleading, but combining the social indicators of trust listed above allows to reduce the possibility of being misinformed. Using the social indicators of trust is an exercise in social cognition and a way of distributing the cognitive labor necessary to come up with trustworthy information. The search for truth is a collective endeavor that needs the cognitive work of the experts and the laymen. The expert produces the content and the layman verify its credibility by navigating the social information the surrounds the expert. Yet, people don’t easily see the collaborative aspect of the search for truth and tend to see the experts as authoritative characters who “impose” their truth to the public in a despotic way. The rejection of expertise is motivated by a demand of epistemic egalitarism against the fundamental inequality we have seen above. This demand is entrenched in the idea that no knowledge is superior and that everyone has the right to believe what she prefers without submitting to any epistemic authority. This creates a sort of epistemic populism that I am going to describe in the next section.

*Epistemic Populism*

People don’t like to be told what they should believe. The autonomy of our thinking is challenged by the experts, who claim to possess superior knowledge. There is a resistance towards the surrender of our beliefs in front of the expert, a sort of pride of one’s own intelligence that makes us autonomous beings. This is well known by communicators and information producers of any kind who take advantage of this natural resistance to knowledge to make people believe any sort of “alternative” truths, that are not produced by the scientific establishment. The rejection of the epistemic authority of the expert in the name of a more democratic access to knowledge and of a skeptical attitude towards any sort of “mainstream”
knowledge leads to what I call \textit{epistemic populism}, that is, an ideology that promotes an egalitarian distribution of knowledge. I call it \textit{epistemic populism} because it reminds the attitude of the political populists of renegade any statement made by the \textit{élites} of power in the name of the commonsense of people and their capacity to choose what is better for them. Of course, this is a caricatural picture of the epistemic populist, that tries to select its most typical features. There exist other accounts of the epistemological aspects of populism that insist on the same features\textsuperscript{9} and other ones.

The epistemic populist is convinced that there is no better knowledge than that she can appraise and understand. The epistemic populist is a naive realist: she believes that the world is described in terms that are too complex and that reality can be deciphered by simpler means than those proposed by various "pundits".

The epistemic populist is, or believes herself to be, a methodological individualist: she believes that her senses and reason are sufficient to see things as they are and that epistemic dependence on other human beings is an unbearable limitation on her cognitive abilities.

The epistemic populist is a monist: there is only one exact description of the world, the one she is able to understand, and he hates the pluralism of scientific theories that complicate a reality that is instead "in plain sight."

The epistemic populist is nostalgic: there was a simple worldview in which there were only two sexes, only four seasons, apples tasted only one way, the climate was not changing, blacks were different from whites, an authentic world, easy to understand with the five senses where we were not asked to "correct" the various biases that make us see things a certain way such as essentialism, tribalism or other natural tendencies of the human spirit. She thinks that the unvarnished picture of the world would be still available if experts did not intervene on it by imposing a mainstream view about what happens around us.

The epistemic populist is not ignorant: she is an information consumerist. Her ability, mainly due to the Web, to find information that confirms her point of view gives her the arrogance to think that she does not need others to get her idea of things.

The epistemic populist is not undemocratic: he is a product of democracy. Indeed, she argues that her opinions should be as valid as everyone else's, and that it is fundamentally undemocratic.

\textsuperscript{9} Cf. Bronk and Jacoby 2020; Ylä-Anttila, 2022.
for those who consider themselves in a position of epistemic superiority and lecture everyone else.

The epistemic populist (like the political populist) has a symbolic, non-delegative conception of democratic representation: those who represent her in ideas must be like her, must resemble her, be a mirror of her, must share the same "common sense."\(^{10}\)

The epistemic populist is arrogant because she is insecure: she does not find herself in the theoretical complexities of mainstream knowledge and wants to limit her exploration of the world to what she can or wants to understand with her "common sense."

This brief idealtypic description leads us to explore an interesting epistemological problem.

What is the common sense to which the epistemic populist appeals? Is there a manifest image of the world to be contrasted to a scientific image of it to which common sense refers? What kind of beliefs does common sense contain? In this section I will try to describe what common sense is from an epistemological point of view.

*The Appeal to Commonsense*

Common sense is a concept that oscillates between two meanings: on the one hand it refers to reason: to have common sense means to be reasonable, that is, able to use reason to arrive at a conclusion. On the other it refers to the idea of "common sense" a difficult concept to define on which philosophy has spilled rivers of ink. In a famous article entitled *A Defense of Common Sense*, philosopher G.E. Moore argued that there are utterances about which no one with "common sense" can disagree. Moore's examples are such utterances as "There exists in the present moment a physical body that is my body"; "This body was born at a certain date in the past"; "The Earth existed before the birth of my body" and so on. Common sense is defined in the history of philosophy sometimes as a "sixth sense" that allows perceptions from the other senses to be integrated into a manifest view of the world (John Locke, Aristotle, Thomas Reid) and at other times as a set of practical/experiential knowledge common to all, which depends on the *koiné* of the group to which it belongs\(^ {11}\). *Koiné* in Greek referred to the average language

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\(^{10}\) For the distinction between these two conceptions of “representation” see H. Pitkin *The Concept of Representation*, 1967, University of California Press.

\(^{11}\) Cf. S. Colvin (2009)
spoken by the Greeks, a mixture of dialects that established the Attica variant as the common language. Common sense is thus the wisdom of the language shared by all. The epistemic populist oscillates between these two interpretations of common sense: she appeals to her reason, an individual faculty that everyone possesses, and argues that using reason everyone should arrive at her conclusions, which are part of "common sense." To depart from this koiné is for the epistemic populist a dangerous abandonment of a vision shared by a people who express themselves in the same language. This call to the koiné soon becomes a call to a tradition, to a way of thinking inherited from a glorious past in which things were said as they were without the excessive complications of contemporary technocratic language. And it is precisely against technocracy that the epistemic populist rebels. Let us see below what the reasons and wrongs of the populist in her conflicting relationship with technocracy are.

**Democracy, Science and Technocracy**

Science is not what it used to be. A global enterprise with international standards of exactitude, science has transformed over the past fifty years into a very different business from the one evoked by the classic image of the scientist who drops an apple on his head. Scientific research has adopted a ruthless business model (publish or perish), and techno-scientific alliances in industrial production have transformed it into a capitalist activity far removed from the norms ascribed to it by sociologist Robert Merton: communalism, universalism, disinterestedness, and organized skepticism. Moreover, from the exact sciences to the social sciences, scientific knowledge is ubiquitous in political decision-making today. Democracies tend to turn into technocracies ruled by elites of experts, which creates a tension between expertise and democracy in at least two respects, as we have seen at the beginning of the chapter: expertise seems to violate on the one hand the condition of equality of subjects, because it considers some subjects cognitively superior to others, and on the other hand the condition of neutrality of liberal democracy, because it favors one opinion, the scientific one, over other opinions.

The Weberian rationalization of society under technocratic drive makes science and technology a new ideology, as Jürgen Habermas argued as early as 1967. The Weberian model still distinguished between scientific rationality and political decision-making, a distinction that according to Habermas is no longer possible because of the rationalization of decision-making processes (Rational choice theory, algorithms) that formalize power in such a way as to make
political decision-making an obstacle to the complete rationalization of society. If today's technocracies find their legitimacy in science, however, science is difficult to legitimize in democracy. Experts are not elected by the people, but more than that: the procedures through which they are selected by power are often opaque, based more on mechanisms to reproduce a class of state technicians than on meritocratic selection mechanisms. This creates a detachment and distrust of the public towards a technocratic power that is distant and does not interact with citizens, nor does it bother to understand based on what values and needs expressed by the public a decision should be made.

The populist thus has apparently good reason to dislike technocracy. The epistemic populist extends this dislike to all science, arguing that scientific thinking is merely a new form of domination that does not consider her reasons. Science is also seen as an activity run by multinational elites that is no longer able to connect with the koiné of citizens. Although there is much common sense in this populist sentiment and it is a view shared by various thinkers and commentators, the consequences of disaffection with science can sometimes be deleterious. The epistemic populist, however, cannot do without expertise although she trusts her common sense: she will therefore seek alternative expertise to mainstream expertise to form her own opinion on a scientific issue.\(^\text{12}\)

Ill-intentioned information producers know very well how the epistemic populist reasons: they have understood her resentment towards the mainstream institutions of knowledge. The design of an alternative source of knowledge, one that goes against the official view, is easy and cheap to create and, in the eyes of the populist, has the same legitimacy as the official one. Alternative sources proliferate on the Web by designing the ground for a new perspective on facts that satisfies the desire of autonomy and independence of the epistemic populist. This “alternative” design was soon seen by various political and intellectual communicators as an opportunity to gain consensus online. The communicator of social networks presents herself to the audience as "one of them," writes short and clear messages, contrasts her style with the verbose style of traditional media, and creates an effect of identification with the audience. The system of likes and shares on the Web allows the effect to be amplified by turning identification into acclaim. The audience, acting on the message, appropriates it as if it were its own word, thus creating the feeling that what it believes comes from itself, whereas it comes from authoritarian

\(^{12}\) Cf. Ylä-Anttila, cit.
and arrogant personalities that exploit the need to believe alternative authorities. The case of the French doctor Didier Raoult\textsuperscript{13} is an example of this process. Doctor Raoult became a prominent character in the media in 2020 by recommending hydroxychloroquine as a remedy for COVID. His “anti-establishment” style was a key ingredient of his success. Raoult presents himself dressed not as a doctor, but as an average \textit{Marseillais}, insults opponents by crying conspiracy, is arrogant and overbearing, talks about a medicine that everyone knows can cure COVID instead of citing incomprehensible statistics, uses \textit{YouTube} instead of insiders' magazines, lashes out at the "system" of science that is cold and distant from the public, and invokes the Hippocratic Oath by saying that he is not interested in making statistics, but in saving lives. The speech is simple, the oppositions clear, the listener identifies with the character, makes his thoughts his own, and believes he himself is speaking. The typical narcissism of the network user is satisfied by a video in which he projects himself, identifies himself by making the leader's words his own without realizing that he is subservient to an authority far more intrusive than the authorities he rejects, but thinking that he is the authority. Doctor Raoult's narrative perfectly fits the mind of the epistemic populist. The complex science of random control trials is pitted against the concrete reality of a known medicine, already on the market and easily accessible to all. His arguments against the potential risks of chloroquine are personal and nostalgic: they come from his childhood in Senegal, where he had taken chloroquine against malaria, and he insists that it is a completely harmless medicine that in the good old days was taken without fuss. Consider that the debate around chloroquine is exploding at a time when very little is still known about COVID and vaccines are not being talked about. Countering the uncertainty of science with a simple and available remedy reinforces that idea of common sense to which the epistemic populist is so attached. Raoult's arrogance toward his colleagues and the scientific establishment in general gives voice to the arrogance of the epistemic populist who sees in her ability to doubt mainstream authority a reason for cognitive empowerment. The use of non-traditionally scientific media such as social networks makes communication seemingly more democratic, although Raoult is not democratic at all and presents himself as a guru who possesses the truth and is not to be contradicted, insulting his opponents without listening to them. It is interesting to note the following paradox: the epistemic populist who rebels against authority is easily preyed

\textsuperscript{13} On the case of Dr. Raoult, see Branch-Smith, Origgi; Morisseau (2022)
upon by authoritarian personalities who reject confrontation with opponents by branding them as incompetent or malevolent.

**Conclusion**

The authority and legitimacy of expertise are problematic because they challenge the common sense of citizens and the intuition that all opinions deserve the same consideration in a democracy. People are asked to blindly trust the experts and they resist this capitulation of reason. They use social information that is available online to evaluate the reputation of the expert. The problem is that social information is uncertain and can lead to “bad beliefs”\(^\text{14}\) about who are the reliable experts. The gap between experts and non-experts resides in the “authorities” that claim to provide exact social information about the experts. The abundance of information online empowers the laymen and may lead to an attitude of epistemic populism, that is, an overconfidence in one own’s capacities to assess who are the reliable experts and an appeal to one’s own commonsense against the complexities of the scientific discourse. To avoid such distortions, science communication should pay attention to the social information that surrounds an expert, that is, “who says what to whom”, and reinforce the credibility and the visibility of the good informants. People do not blindly trust, nor they trust completely rationally. They use social information as a heuristic to evaluate the prestige of the expert. That is why it is important to keep social information as clean as possible to avoid the noise produced by ill-intentioned informants.

\(^{14}\) On the notion of bad beliefs see N. Levy (2022).


