

Aix Panel Discussion – Panel 1 – How Can Experts Recover their Legitimacy?

This year's *Rencontres Économiques* address the deterioration of trust in our societies. One area in which that deterioration has been apparent and commented on, at least in industrial countries, is science and expertise. For the sake of our discussion, I consider that Science produces “truthful” knowledge, and that expertise calls on scientific knowledge to explain situations and inform action¹. However, scientists and experts in many areas seem to be perceived either as prophets of doom or as culprits for things that go wrong, as if science was assigned a social role of harbinger of a pre-determined future or prescriber of successful solutions.

We should be concerned, since trust in the role of scientific knowledge has been one of the underlying principles of enlightenment, a state of mind that has played such a role in the considerable growth in standards of living over the last centuries². What is at stake is the potential demise of enlightenment and a return of obscurantist tendencies. This is a very significant dimension of the crisis of democracy.

The purpose of our panel discussion is to refine this diagnosis, to inquire about potential causes and explanations, and to discuss what could be done collectively and through policy to restore faith in science and expertise. The remarks below are intended to invite reactions and initiate the debate.

Loss of Trust in Science and Expertise

Is there hard evidence that trust in science and expertise has declined in our societies? In fact, new challenges linked to technical progress, global challenges such as climate change, geopolitical transformations, rather call for even deeper scientific investigations and there is more demand for specialized knowledge. The perceived loss of trust might be a reaction to the difficulty faced by scientists and experts to provide timely responses to these new and pressing challenges, and their inability to provide much comfort against the accumulation of risks. Is there more than disappointment that science does not mitigate uncertainty about the future – and even projects bleak outlooks - at a time when so many of our practices and institutions are weakened by technological and political transformations?

However, there are also additional dimensions, related to the play of power politics in mature democracies facing highly complex, interdisciplinary challenges (that cannot be reduced to any expertise in a given scientific domain) and in which scientific arguments are interpreted, contradicted, and used to shape advocacy, cement interests and achieve conviction. But recent evolutions go much further: science seems to have lost the monopoly of legitimate knowledge it may have earlier enjoyed³. In generating political support and winning political debates in many developed countries, truthfulness

¹ Other forms of expertise, for example legal expertise, are not discussed here.

² This is emphatically documented in Pinker, Steven (2018), *Enlightenment Now. The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress*, Penguin Books (which was hailed by Bill Gates as his “new favourite book of all time”).

³ Habermas (1987) comments on the dominant view of “knowledge-as-science”.

seems to have been replaced by “truthiness” (to paraphrase *The Economist*). Of course, manipulation and propaganda have long been features of politics, but conventional wisdom tended to equate sound policy with a rational process using available scientific knowledge to derive the course of action most likely to reach specific objectives at minimum costs. While that textbook model of rational policymaking always was a simplistic representation, it has recently fell further apart from reality, as if scientific knowledge had lost political relevance. Trump’s America, Brexit UK, Gilets Jaunes France, countless populist experiments suggest at least impatience against the failure of expertise to provide actionable and possibly costless solutions and dismiss tradeoffs, and to address questions that are socially meaningful but may fall outside their zone of comfort. Is there more than a mistrust of elites, which extend to scientists and experts who belong to these elites?

Talking about loss of trust in science and expertise is probably too general. Both are multipronged, cover many disciplines, skills, areas of knowledge and competences, and the diagnosis requires much refinement. Actually, in the expanding “market for knowledge claims” sustained by the digital economy and social media, where scientists and experts compete with many others, mistrust might even be a rather sound reaction and is needed to select legitimate knowledge within a flow of potential garbage. Like everyone, if they are to be trusted, scientists and experts need to be held accountable, to prove their qualifications, to explain where they speak or write from, i.e. what are their intentions in using their knowledge. Trust must be deserved, and mistrust may simply be a symptom of weakening relevance of current modes of accountability and changing requirements. The perceived mistrust may thus simply be a signal that current scientific institutions do no longer provide accountability mechanisms that are felt adequate given changes in the relationship between science and society.

Science and society

Discussing that relationship goes of course well beyond the remit of our panel. However, three features seem to be less than fully commented on and deserve more attention: the incompleteness of science, the prevalence of politics, and social aversion to risk.

First, the intrinsic complexity of the challenges we face compounds the fact that scientific knowledge is incomplete. There are many aspects of any societal challenge that we don’t fully understand. Existing knowledge therefore gives partial insights only, and so will any kind of expertise. This means that “scientific truths” do not, most of the time, encapsulate all relevant aspects in discussing potential actions and options. This is not a call for relativism, but simply a realization that recognized truths are one aspect only of the reality to deal with. There are knowledge loopholes that can be exploited in debates and deliberations and that open ample ground for judgment and for diverging, yet legitimate interpretations. Yet, policy advice often works under the implicit pretense that existing knowledge provides enough sound ground for precise recommendations that owe more to science than to the advisors’ own priors and preferences. Moreover, the focus on the specific dimensions that scientific investigation has explored signals an implicit choice to ignore other dimensions (one investigates where there is light), while these may matter from a public opinion or social choice perspective. The incompleteness of scientific knowledge therefore implies a potential lack of social and political relevance and may even be in opposition with prevalent social values: it has both technical and political ramifications.

A second, directly related challenge could be called the “return of politics” or the failure of a positivist illusion. Recent evolutions have shaken the values shared within societies (social consent) and among them (anchoring the global liberal order). These values, including a recognition of diversity, a belief in the economic and human benefits from trade and multilateral governance, tolerance, humanism, had been more or less taken for granted after the post-war reconstruction which had been based on them. Within the framework they defined, debates could become essentially technical and politics dealt with adjustments within the framework rather than the framework itself. Scientific competence and technical skills were left to inspire policies and major initiatives. The construction of the European Union, the institutions of globalization, all were the product of expert elites. This regime is now increasingly rejected. Ethical issues linked to technical change, unbalanced growth – producing inequalities and unsustainability – and global mobility of capital and people have put the consent for those values under increasing strain. However, the difficulty of organizing a democratic debate about shared values has left expertise and science as ultimate de facto arbiters, as if they could substitute for politics. One cannot and should not expect them to define the values that societies coalesce around. The scientific and expert debate provides at best an indirect and counterproductive way to address crucial values.

Part of the mistrust we perceive, therefore, may not be actual mistrust, but rather a deep recognition that only political debate and deliberation can anchor social consent, and that discussing major values, which is the political game at work, is not primarily a question of science or expertise. This may come with a feeling that power has been for too long monopolized by scientific and technical competences, and that politicians and policymakers have broadly abdicated agency. What looks like a crisis of democracy may well be a reaction of democratic systems to technocratic tendencies, through which technical debates and skills actually shaped politics and policy objectives, instead of informed and balanced deliberations. One of the features of the crisis of democracies is that the gamble of reconciling scientific truth with democratic deliberation was never fully addressed. This is one of the limits of enlightenment, to the extent that consensus may lead to the conviction that there is one way only to be enlightened, and that science and expertise, an elitist domain, knows it. The end of the Cold War and talks of the “end of History” may have supported such a view.

One sees examples of it in many places, and through pointed terminology. For example, it has become fashionable to insist (notably in the development arena) that policies should be “evidence-based”, as if the observation of past “evidence”, however scientifically robust, could cover all legitimate choices under uncertainty and could unearth policy paths to pursue. A less prescriptive, but much more relevant approach is to talk about “evidence-informed politics”, thus combining the important role of evidence (and policy evaluations) with the need for judgment, debate and deliberation. In that context, the role of science and expertise is to inform and help decision makers to mitigate the risks involved in any decision they have to take. It is not to prescribe what to do. The incompleteness of scientific knowledge means that there is always ample room for interpretation and argumentation, and this is a fundamental component of democratic deliberation. The balance between relativism and hard truth is hard to maintain. Yet, perceived technocratic guidance is criticized for its failure to meet various kinds of objectives, even though the latter may not have been explicitly pursued through expert recommendations.

A third challenge is related to expectations thrown on science and expertise, which I relate to risk aversion. There is a demand for scientific expertise to protect citizens against unpredictable future events. Scientific knowledge is expected to know what works and what needs to be done, and to anticipate risks and catastrophes. If the latter materialize, this will then be due to the mistake of experts. For example, economists are expected to make projections – which is fine because they guide analytical thinking and decision – and are criticized when these projections do not materialize. They are also expected to predict economic crises, while the history of the latter confirms that there is an on-going cycle of excess enthusiasm followed by excess disillusion. One recalls the letter sent by the Queen to the economists, scolding them for having failed to predict the 2008 crisis, for example. This risk aversion extends to policy decisions. Taking decisions amounts to taking risks, which creates a political vulnerability, and it is convenient to (pretend to) assign to expertise the responsibility of evacuating these risks. This strengthens the position of experts and gives them more agency and visibility. But it gives policymakers a strong incentive to select experts that will help push their own views. Hence the ambivalence with which expertise is delivered and received. On the one hand, experts are expected to know much more than they actually do, and through their own behavior (notably when they formulate normative advice), they may reinforce these expectations. They may tend to ignore the boundary between “objective” knowledge and their own beliefs. Sooner or later, the reality test may expose unrealistic expectations, and when it does, it is in turn interpreted as a failure of expertise. On the other hand, expert knowledge is mainly appreciated when it validates pre-existing views or serves an argument and strategies of persuasion. Expertise is used to shape advocacy.

Preserving the enlightenment

What are the concrete steps that could restore social faith in science and expertise and sustain enlightenment? I’ll comment on three dimensions for further debate, all having to do with the relationship between science and society: scientific education, scientific institutions, and the approach to policymaking.

First, scientific education is a crucial component. But my focus here is not the formation of scientists, although it is an important objective of the education system. It is the advent of a broader scientific culture (as opposed to, or in complement to, scientific skills), in which the nature and role of science are studied and shared widely. Very early on, citizens need to be confronted with the nature of knowledge, the difference between knowledge, perceptions and beliefs, the options to develop and exert a critical mind. That dimension does not receive enough attention. Such culture would be useful for scientists as well as non-scientists, and as a social antidote to the spreading of.

Second, the credibility of scientists and experts hinges on transparency and accountability. Institutions are needed to provide them, because citizens are not in a position to assess scientific quality. Current institutions, however, are liable to scrutiny. Peer pressure and control creates a club approach, fails to detect many instances of fraud and cheating, as largely documented. The criteria developed to assess the quality of scientific production may also introduce biases and opportunistic behaviors. The effectiveness of scientific institutions and the ethics they produce is a key component of trust in science. However, transparency and accountability matter not only for the production of science. The way science is used to shape expertise, arguments and recommendations also deserves scrutiny. What

are the experts' biases and own interests? To whom do they respond? Producing scientific knowledge does belong to science. But using it to build arguments and make recommendations is inevitably political and ideological. This should be better recognized as a normal state of affairs.

Third, it would be useful to deepen our understanding of the demand for, and use of expertise in decision-making. This calls for a reassessment of technocratic decision-making models that do not correspond to reality. The role of decision makers is to take decisions, which involves taking risks. The role of expertise is to analyze these risks and help mitigate them. In the process, politics and ideology matter. Clarifying this dynamics, interaction and process would help bringing down the excessive expectations thrown on scientists and experts.

In conclusion, my own conviction is that this debate on trust in science and expertise is ultimately one on the enlightenment values. In his most recent book ⁴, Amin Maalouf comments on the demonetization of ideals, source of a general moral wreck. This is why a political compass based on values is so crucial. It cannot be addressed only through the quality of technical expertise.

⁴ *Le naufrage des civilisations*, Grasset, 2019.