The Politics of Expertise, Patronage and Public Engagement
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The Politics of Expertise
By Stephen P. Turner
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Winning the Scholarly Trifecta

Stephen Turner's *The Politics of Expertise* (2014) is a fascinating collection of re-printed essays. Although the original publication dates run from 1996 to 2013, the chapters contain timely mediations on how power and knowledge become conjoined and contested.

Turner, a Distinguished University Professor at the University of Southern Florida, established a unique career trajectory by developing authoritative analyses of issues that—to do them justice—require inquiry across the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Not only has Turner advanced highly regarded positions on philosophical issues related to practice and normativity, but he is the longest serving Collaborating Editor of *Social Studies of Science,* the premier journal for research in Science and Technology Studies (STS).

In *The Politics of Expertise,* Turner's genius for interdisciplinary synthesis (here, integrating philosophy, sociology, and history) and creating sharp taxonomic distinctions (including demarcating different types of experts and different forms of politics) shine through. Inspired by the science studies tradition of grounding theory in empirical case studies "with concrete implications and known outcomes," Turner carefully considers potent, yet highly complex examples (4). Standouts include the Columbia space shuttle disaster, the decision to drop the atomic bomb, controversies surrounding urban planning, differentiated international approaches for using expertise in bureaucracies, and frustrating debates to global climate science.

Unlike his *Liberal Democracy 3.0: Civil Society in an Age of Experts* (2003), which revolved around a central problem—the challenge experts pose to contemporary liberal democratic institutions—Turner's present ambitions are diverse and wide-reaching. Rather than simply revisiting the previous theme or drilling down into a narrow alternative—like proffering a politically theory that is grounded in a foundational account of what expertise fundamentally is and how it can be distinguished from alternatives—Turner primarily focuses on specific experts (albeit ones of different stripes, deliberately not restricting attention to paradigm cases of scientific expertise) who have ideas that get accepted or rejected based largely on the varied norms that pervade different social and political systems. These norms concern four principal themes—"the distribution of power, the distribution of knowledge, the aggregation of knowledge, and legitimacy"—and become pressing, intellectually and practically, when attempts are made to answer key questions that, I believe, can be sorted into three groups (5).

1) What processes determine who deserves to contribute to or even make authoritative decisions that affect other people's lives? And how do individuals and groups who believe they should be entitled to this authority convince others that their knowledge, skill, or experience is adequate and intentions trustworthy for the tasks at hand?

2) Since different people know different things, how do institutions and others in need decide whom to turn to for input when trying to solve complicated problems, especially when there are competing options and time-sensitive decisions have to be made?

3) If solving complicated problems requires organizing knowledge that different advisers offer and different sources contain, how do institutions and others in need determine which processes should be used to assemble it?

Turner believes that emphasizing this cluster of issues and questions leads to three salutary outcomes: i) nuanced analyses are provided of the political benefits different experts offer and the liabilities they pose; ii) compelling explanations are given as to why different knowledge regimes succeed and fail, and iii) epistemological challenges are spotlighted that all too often are glossed over or unduly minimized in standard accounts of political decision-making. He's right, and in my opinion Turner succeeds at winning the intended scholarly trifecta. I highly recommend his book to anyone who is interested in the issues just outlined.

Sociology and Patronage

Because I have strong views about the importance of scholars in the humanities and social sciences applying their expertise to directly enhance public discourse, I found Chapter 8, "From Edification to Expertise: Sociology as a 'Profession,'" (originally published in 1992 and co-authored with William Buxton) especially interesting and important. Given the case study orientation of *The Politics of Expertise*, the remainder of this review will focus on it, rather than engaging in the futile task of trying to make deep yet succinct connections between the different chapters.

Turner constructs a genealogy that accounts for how sociology transformed from an enterprise that once aspired to change social conditions to a scientific one that, through norms and procedures connected to an emergent vision of professionalization, aimed to provide systematic knowledge of issues that can be explained in social terms. Just as Nietzsche turned to history to explain how values become inverted, Turner looks through it for insight into what brought about a great disciplinary reversal. As if it were possible to speak directly to groups who are separated as much by time as intellectual and practical incommensurability, he writes: "For us, 'sociology' is a body of knowledge that, incidentally, is taught; for them, it was a public teaching that, incidentally, was a body of knowledge" (155).

The key to Turner's analysis of what has driven change is announced on the very first page of *The Politics of Expertise*. There he writes: "The reasoning that runs through these chapters evolved from posing a problem closely related to expertise: patronage" (1).

Patronage is central to Turner's account of the shifting tide of sociology as he argues that forms of sociological expertise change over time partly in relation to the types of financial support that are available. Patronage makes certain types of research possible, and it helps the principals conducting them achieve prominence. By virtue of looking at expertise this way, Turner depicts sociologists who have been associated with great ideas, acknowledged for producing valued work, and who have been treated as thought leaders as entrepreneurs—which is to say, as folks who figured out how to provide specialized services to audiences who, in return, responded as paying clients. While Turner clearly is not advancing an overly-simplistic causal thesis that posits available funding wholly determines what sociologists deem worth researching, there are undeniable echoes of Karl Marx. You cannot read Chapter 8 without being reminded of the materialist thesis that economic infrastructure profoundly influences the intellectual activities taking place in the superstructure.

As Turner sees it, then, the earliest sociologists were more directly engaged with the public and its struggles for changing social conditions—indeed were "defined…by the actions and intellectual needs of the public"—because their labor was financed by the following sorts of benefactors: groups who needed surveys conducted to establish that changes in social conditions occurred or that certain social realities existed and should be acknowledged; groups who needed resources to further processes of socialization; groups whose education depended on the use textbooks for education; and groups eager to advance their grasp of how society operates by purchasing books written by public intellectuals (158). While these kinds of assistance conferred benefits, they also proved constraining. The markets imposed limits on the type, amount, and monetary value of sociological activities (157).

Over time, enough sociologists became dissatisfied with placating the demands of "reformer audiences" and found an alternative through research subsidies—backed by councils and institutes supported by Rockefeller and related sources—that allowed for a new type inquiry to become viable: scientific work that did not have immediate practical value and yet required support for administration, field work, and publications (159). Sociologists who persisted in waving the old emancipatory banner became negatively "stigmatized" for not getting with the program and remaining fixated on operations that were "insufficiently professional" (160). According to Turner, such demonization— especially as it came to be understood over time in standard reflections on the history of the discipline—involved a romanticized vision of what it means to be a professional. In other words, the particular norms that happened to be associated with professionalism became idealized as if they were, in principle, the best of all ideals and not, at all, strategic attitudes adopted to please contingent sources of backing.

As more time progressed, donors supported new projects. Among the notable ones Turner emphasizes are the Industrial Hazards Project, work on building national morale, and the formation of Area Studies. Through it all, Turner sees a trajectory forming that was

animated, in part, to provide sociologists with "permanent subsidization": offer enough courses undergraduates find interesting, while recognizing that their tastes typically are drawn to popular, but not professional issues; court favor from audiences who value highly specialized knowledge of social processes and structures, believe that the information can add value to training professionals from various disciplines or enhance decisions about governance, and have both resources and leverage to act upon these convictions; and, recognize that the general public and sociologists are not on equal footing with respect to issues sociologists study, with the disparity being so pronounced the public should be conceived as "a patient to be treated therapeutically" (170).

Academic Engagement and Patronage Today

Turner concludes Chapter 8 by reflecting on what was lost in sociological struggle to successfully free itself from patrons whose interests did not align with the goal of helping the discipline mature into a robust science. He sees a significant price has having been paid: diminished moral capital; "trained incapacities" that prevent disciplinary sociologists from effectively communicating with "mainstream" audiences and having outsiders consider their work relevant; a difficult time connecting with "increasingly disencultured undergraduate and graduate students," and a clear sense of how to survive when authority and resources depend upon pleasing relatively small audiences who can easily come to change their minds about whether supporting sociology—or, at least a particular version if it—is a good investment (177-178).

Twenty-two years have elapsed since Turner initially published his reflections, and the issue of public participation has only become more pressing. As evidenced by the firestorm of responses to Nicholas Kristof's Op-Ed "Professors, We Need You!" (2014), the stakes go much higher than sociology. Today, there are two leading questions. Why do disciplines across the humanities and social sciences do so little to systematically encourage academics—who, in working for tenure and promotion, are strapped for time and forced to prioritize tasks that increases the chance of successfully meeting these goals—to use their expertise to directly engage with the public? And, what kinds of institutional and cultural reform are needed to improve things?

In academic and popular settings, D.E. Wittkower, Lucinda Rush, and I have offered preliminary answers, using Philosophy of Technology as a paradigm case, but making generalizable suggestions: "Public Philosophy of Technology: Motivations, Barriers, and Reforms" (2014) and "Revisiting Kristof's Criticism of Academic Irrelevance" (2014). On the reform side, we have made a case for the following sorts of things: 1) doing a better job appreciating the value of open-access publications that do not charge authors fees; 2) doing a better job recognizing that public writing can advance interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research; 3) providing more support for public engagement under the auspices of enhancing "scholarship of engagement" and "scholarship of application"; 4) getting professional organizations to make their support of public engagement explicit in key documents; 5) getting journals to consider re-printing popular articles, while giving them a special designation that distinguishes their content from other submissions; 6) providing more training and resources for faculty to pitch editors, communicate with

reporters, and use social media; and 7) altering the expectations communicated when enculturating graduate students and new faculty.

Since Turner will be given a chance to respond to my reflections, I'd like for him to address some of our proposals in light of how he sees the current state of academic expertise. Additionally, I'd like for Turner to discuss a topic that I wish played a more important role in his book: technology. To be sure, Turner does mention technology in passing. For example, in the discussion of aggregation, he writes: "There is, for example, the knowledge of the dead of generations past, black-boxed into the technology and procedures we take for granted" (49). While observations like this are worth considering, the fact remains that technology certainly does not figure prominently in Turner's reflections. And yet right now, technology plays an important role in considerations related to patronage.

As University of Maryland Law Professor Frank Pasquale points out in "Social Science in an Era of Corporate Big Data" (2014), there currently exists significant incentives for social scientists to collaborate with firms that have access to potent big data: big data has an aura of scientific validity; top journals are keen on publishing research that makes use of proprietary datasets; the corporate world often is not subject to same constraints as Institutional Review Board bound academic researchers; and shuttling between academic and corporate worlds—while possibly devising an exit strategy to leave the academic one—has become a good strategy for pursuing economic security in a climate where tenured jobs are increasingly hard to come by.

Given the immense power wielded by companies who control the right big data sets, the secrecy surrounding their intellectual property, and the financial motivations for continued growth, it is a pressing matter of social good for social scientists and humanists alike to find support for critically analyzing the activities of Facebook, Google, and other Silicon Valley giants, and directly discussing their concerns with the public. We would all benefit from Turner's views on where academics should turn to for assistance and what impact doing so might have.

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