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Experts, Citizens, and Evidence: Who Manages What?

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Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has an unusual daily routine. Monday through Friday he leads a press conference from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. He fields a range of questions on his government's new policies. Almost a month ago, President Obrador was questioned by reporters on the negative predictions made by international agencies on the state of the country's economy. He replied in brief saying: "I have other information." Apparently, President Obrador and his administration have other kinds of evidence that they use to evaluate the impact of new policy including the protocols used to improve the national economy.

This example illustrates a critical circumstance in democracies; namely, what is the true role of expert knowledge and, specifically, the scientific evidence that influences public decisions? Of course, this is not a new concern. And, certainly, there are different theoretical approaches used for analysis. Cristóbal Bellolio's "The Quinean Assumption. The Case of Science as a Public Reason" addresses the issue from a specific theoretical framework: political liberalism. Bellolio points out the benefits of using science as a public reason in terms that Rawls defines.

Plain Truths

In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls describes public reason as "... the reason of equal citizens who, as a collective body, exercise final political and coercive power over one and other in enacting laws and in amending its constitution" (1993, 214). Public reason is restricted only for debates in which "constitutional essentials" and "questions of basic justice" are defined. Rawls remarks that "we are not to appeal to comprehensive religious and philosophical doctrines ... nor to elaborate economic theorist of general equilibrium, say, if they are in dispute" (1993, 225). We are only allowed to use "**the plain truths** now widely accepted or available, to citizens generally" (1993, 225, emphasis mine).

In light of this situation, Bellolio remarks that scientific reasons could be part of this set of "plain truths;" specifically, those that he considers not to be controversial scientific reasons. In his view, this could be helpful in such scenarios where "general beliefs of the population at large" are not aware or informed of these reasons. Cases such as climate change or evolutionary biology illustrate a current social dilemma that justify Bellolio's thesis. Despite the fact that there is available scientific evidence supporting these critical topics, experts and the public struggle to agree on the accuracy of these pressing issues. That said, science has the potential to be used as a public reason by encouraging citizens to approach and ponder the expert evidence available.

A common detraction to this claim points out the complexity of an expert's judgements as a real obstacle for citizens to examine and manage evidence. In facing this issue, the key argument of the work lies in providing a satisfactory response to this challenge. In doing this, Bellolio uses Quine's statement explaining that there is nothing remarkable in scientific cognitive work. As Bellolio mentions, "Scientific reasoning is simply an extension of everyday reasoning and common sensical ways of thinking" (2019, 2). In his view, Quine's naturalized epistemology offers an approach to understanding that the nature of scientific

knowledge is only the result of special training rather than someone having a special cognitive capability. Taking into account that there is very little difference between the way that scientific experts and regular people leverage common sense, it is safe to say that Quine's statement carries political implication.

And that's exactly what bolsters Bellolio's argument: citizens are capable to "*lay flair for evidence*" (2019, 208, original emphasis) and evaluate it. Therefore, there are conditions to assume scientific reasons as public reason.

Despite a critical point in Bellolio's argument that seeks to define non-controversial scientific reasons as public reasons, he is actually not concerned about addressing instances where scientific explanation might not be controversial. In my view, this is the fault in his argument. There are many reasons by which some scientific assumption gets a no controversial status, but not all of them response to epistemic reasons. It could be just a consensus between experts. As Solomon states: "Consensus is not truth, it is merely agreement" (2014, 253). At this point in his theory, Bellolio wants to encourage liberals to acknowledge the contribution of science as public reason, especially considering the challenges faced in our modern-day, post-truth era. But strictly speaking, he is more concerned about defending the groundwork of public reason than facing the real challenges he's tacitly addressing. As I will explain, there are at least two crucial challenges that he dismisses.

Challenges to Bellolio's Account

Beginning with his key argument, I generally agree with the statement on citizens' capability to "*lay flair for evidence.*" However, this assumption is not enough to blur the differences between experts and non-experts as Bellolio seems to highlight. In my view, this is crucial because political discussion could be muddled if we reduced the critical contributions of science to public debate in scenarios where citizens had the opportunity to contemplate evidence. The distinction between scientific experts and regular people is social, which indicates that expert knowledge (in this case, scientific knowledge) responds to particular practices, institutions, and social rules that are beyond the individual scope. Most of the time, rather than evaluate scientific evidence, citizens trust in experts who not only provide them with information, but they also trust them to evaluate and criticize the data at hand. This is a sociological fact with epistemological implications: we trust in institutions; therefore, we need to recognize trust as an epistemic feature.

Additionally, it seems to me that Bellolio neglects to examine the nuances that we need to consider every time we talk about scientific outcomes that could be used in public debate such as statics data, models, theoretical laws, and hypotheses. Here, the question is: what are the scientific outcomes determined as not controversial? Moreover, could these points be demonstrated and understood by citizens? Of course, citizens could learn about them, but it seems to me that only before introducing a specialized education initiative could we expect them to gain a better understanding of these issues. And despite these efforts, they would still not be fully ready to demonstrate and explain the entire scope of a specific topic. This is the responsibility of an expert, which why their presence is growing in our society. Most of the time we need experts to even translate basic information to citizens (cf. Origgi 2015).

Of course, implementing specialized training involves different challenges and even poses a risk to democracy. Regardless, doing so requires more than just recognizing the capabilities of an average person to manage evidence. We also need to explain and prove why we can trust, in epistemic terms, institutions to provide expert evidence. That is why I am skeptical about this democratic notion of holding citizens responsible for managing expert evidence and critical information within public debate. The contribution of science to democracy goes further than encouraging citizens to manage scientific evidence. In fact, it implies the guarantee of provisions of data and evidence for social institutions.

In the example that I presented in the opening, the Mexican government's claims that they have vague (and mysterious) evidence to dispel notions of an unstable economy is not sufficient for Mexican citizens to formulate opinions and feelings about the national economy. We need to review whether or not we can trust, in epistemic terms, the alternative evidence that President Obrador advocates. We also need to admit two conditions that did not appear in Bellolio's argument: first, social epistemic circumstances play a crucial role in the way an individual evaluates analyses; second, there is no one correct way to talk about "the public." This will help us to understand its real weight and perhaps something more important: "Make us search for a place of reflection within the relationship between philosophy and politics without being doomed to misery," as the untranslated philosopher Nora Rabotnikof once said (2005, 25).

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