



Gil Eyal, *The Crisis of Expertise*

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Mark B. Brown¹

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With especially grim implications, the coronavirus pandemic provides further evidence for what careful observers have long understood: expertise is both indispensable and insufficient for coping with society's most urgent problems. People following events in the United States have seen the glaring contrast between the judicious briefings of infectious disease expert Dr. Anthony Fauci and the spectacularly ignorant ramblings of President Donald Trump. While many have rightly demanded more Fauci and less Trump (much less), Fauci seems to be acutely aware that simply putting the experts in charge is not a solution. Indeed, expert guidance during the pandemic has changed repeatedly, and it has often been contradictory or ambiguous. This has been due in part to rapidly developing scientific knowledge, but it has also been a result of changes in human behavior, as well as the different value-laden judgments of experts working in different political and cultural contexts.

Gil Eyal wrote *The Crisis of Expertise* before the pandemic, but he briefly mentions Trump and Brexit as symptoms of “an all-out assault on expertise, in which populist politicians are riding the crest of a long-term wave of disaffection, yet doing their best to amplify doubt and mistrust” (p. 3). However, Eyal quickly delves into more fundamental issues. Echoing other scholars, Eyal notes that today we have a “two-headed *pushmi-pullyu* of unprecedented reliance on science and expertise coupled with increased suspicion, skepticism, and dismissal of scientific findings, expert opinion, or even of whole branches of investigation” (p. 4). Despite widespread insistence that politicians should show more respect for “the facts,” that's not the main problem. Empirical evidence does not speak for itself, and what counts as a fact is generally the result of a long and convoluted social process. Nor is the problem that some people are simply anti-science.

✉ Mark B. Brown
mark.brown@csus.edu

¹ Department of Political Science, California State University, Sacramento, Sacramento, CA, USA

Those who reject scientific expertise in particular domains—vaccines, climate change, wearing masks during a pandemic—generally accept science and expertise in other areas of life. Instead, Eyal argues that the key problem is a fundamental mismatch between science and politics with regard to their basic institutional dynamics. Eyal asks us to consider a three-lane highway. The slow lane is science, with endless time to study and revise hypotheses. The fast lane is politics, with short-term pressures, constraints, and deadlines. And the middle-lane is policy relevant expertise, which is caught in the tension between science and politics, and thus inherently prone to conflict and crisis (pp. 7–8).

Chapter 1 provides a social history of the concept of expertise. The word “expertise” as a type of knowledge was not widespread in English until the 1960s. Its use increased by an astonishing 4,300 percent between 1955 and 2000 (p. 13). People became more interested in expertise, Eyal argues, because disputes in law, administration, and public life increasingly revolved around competing assumptions about the status and legitimacy of expert knowledge. When everyone agreed who the experts were, there was little need for a word that defines what they possess. But efforts to define the term did not help very much, and expertise has become an “essentially contested concept,” because it allocates social status and power to some actors and denies it to others. Eyal’s book aims primarily to map debates rather than take sides, and so he declines to provide his own definition of expertise (p. 19).

In Chapter 2, Eyal examines debates over the nature of expertise. He develops a typology structured around two lines of debate. First, does expertise reside in actual competence and experience, or is it a matter of socially attributed status and reputation? Second, is expertise a matter of tacit and embodied knowledge, or is it a matter of explicit and abstract rules? These two questions yield a two-by-two matrix, with four theories of expertise and their associated research programs. Eyal says the real dispute among these research programs is “not about what expertise *is*, but about what it *should be*” (p. 36). They differ, for example, with regard to their views on the appropriate balance between technocracy and participatory democracy. And they differ on whether it is better to trust impersonal expert systems (professional certifications, peer review, etc.) or the professional judgment of individual experts.

The problem of trust is the focus of Chapter 3, and Eyal rightly points out that widespread concern about a lack of public trust in experts tends to underestimate how difficult it is to establish trust in the first place. Rather than asking why people don’t trust experts, we should ask why they ever would (p. 43). Eyal argues that the entire enterprise of measuring public trust in science is based on the flawed assumption that trust and mistrust are opposites. Trust depends on a supportive social and institutional context, which includes opportunities to express distrust. Trust in experts is like gift giving, which also depends on established networks, habits, and relationships. “The one who trusts gives to the trustee the gift of personal faith, hoping to be rewarded in return by trustworthy stewardship of her interests. Yet, she can neither give too readily, nor can she give too grudgingly” (pp. 59–60). When scientists and politicians insist that anyone who distrusts experts is irrational, then citizens cannot give their trust freely, and they resort to either blind faith or complete distrust.

A key cause of the increasing public concern about trust in experts has been the rise since the 1960s of public discourses on risk. In Chapter 4, Eyal methodically demolishes the notion that expert risk analysis could ever provide precise and calculable assessments of specific dangers. Most threats to human health and the environment involve irresolvable uncertainties and ignorance, and risk analysis inevitably requires value judgments. When lay people give greater weight to unlikely but catastrophic events—nuclear accidents, allergic responses to vaccines—they are not being irrational. They are making a value-laden judgment to give priority to their own interests over those of the general population (p. 72). Ultimately, Eyal argues, risk analysis actually tends to undermine trust in experts, because it displaces blame from polluters onto the system of risk analysis itself, and hence, onto governments and experts (p. 78). In this respect, risk analysis has not only failed to alleviate the crisis of legitimacy in Western democracies, it has made it worse.

Chapter 5 examines the crisis of expertise as a crisis of legitimacy, invoking the famous debate between Niklas Luhmann and Jürgen Habermas. On the one hand, legitimacy depends on the possibility of giving a justification for government decisions. On the other hand, in the real world, such justifications rarely satisfy everyone. Citizens must thus accept that justifications could *in principle* satisfy everyone, while forgoing the demand that they actually do. In the 1960s and 70s, citizens became increasingly unwilling to forgo such demands. The state responded, in the “first round” of the conflict, Eyal writes, with technocratic appeals to expertise. But that strategy backfired, because in the “second round,” critics from all sides attacked the government’s experts as politically biased. The critics didn’t simply reject expertise as such, but instead they appealed to their own experts. As a result, Eyal writes, following several other commentators, “Instead of politics becoming technical problem-solving, science became politicized.” This politicization of science leads to “a third round,” which in some respects continues today: the state intervenes “to rescue its rescuers” by attempting to reorganize the political use of expertise (pp. 97–103).

In Chapter 6, Eyal develops a typology of four prominent strategies within this “third round.” First, some attempt to double-down on technocracy by finding ways to exclude unqualified participants. A key problem with this approach is that the experts who are most likely to be perceived as politically neutral are often not those with the most competence and experience on the issue at hand. Moreover, this approach depends not only on refuting the arguments of charlatans, “but also the exercise of administrative power” (p. 110), which makes it vulnerable to challenge by anyone who gets excluded. A second strategy goes in the opposite direction by seeking to maximize public participation, inclusion, and transparency. The key challenge for this approach is that increasing inclusion renders consensus more difficult, and critics accuse experts of trying to quash debate. A third strategy seeks to establish “mechanical objectivity” with quantitative measurement and standardized procedures, such as randomized controlled trials for the approval of new pharmaceuticals. This approach tends to discount the value judgments that inevitably shape such procedures. A fourth strategy responds to the weaknesses of the other three approaches by outsourcing expertise to “hybrid forums” like the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Such efforts tend to be organized in non-state venues, enlisting diverse forms of expertise through bottom-up procedures that

maximize inclusion, while still seeking to generate consensus. They aim to preempt politicization by foregrounding uncertainty and disagreement. Unfortunately, their efforts easily go wrong. Erring on the side of inclusive deliberation leads to unending controversy, while erring on the side of decision-making leads to accusations of prematurely ending debate. Eyal concludes with the melancholy observation that “the responses to the legitimacy crisis backfire and exacerbate it, especially as they spar with one another. Science itself becomes infected, and the attempts to organize, pluralize, mechanize, or outsource expertise are all caught in a self-reinforcing vortex of mutual pollution and mutual undermining” (p. 129).

A bit of hope appears in Chapter 7, where Eyal draws on a biblical story of the prophet Balaam, who “having set out to curse, he found himself to be a blessing” (p. 130). Eyal finds an analogous dynamic in various instances in which denunciations of regulatory expertise have had the unintended effect of strengthening expert authority. Drawing on Daniel Carpenter’s history of the FDA, Eyal writes, “When activists complained about ‘industry bias’, they reinforced the FDA’s image as protector of the public. When industry complained of ‘over caution’, it reinforced the perception of the agency as composed of careful medical specialists” (p. 135). Expertise is so tightly woven into the daily functioning of modern governments that attacks on it merely reinforce its status. Lest this argument sound like a functionalist justification for the status quo, Eyal recognizes that efforts to “manufacture doubt” and prevent government responses to industrial and environmental risks, “do untold damage to public health, perhaps even to the very fabric of life on Planet Earth” (p. 137). Regulatory agencies and their associated experts will survive the ongoing debates over expertise, but the “window of opportunity to reverse global warming trends may be closing” (p. 141). In that case, the reader might wonder, why does Eyal so carefully restrict his book to topologizing political theories of expertise? Why doesn’t he make a case for which theory he considers most promising, or at least tell us more about how he evaluates their relative advantages and disadvantages for addressing the urgent public issues at hand?

Eyal concludes the book with brief reflections on “trans-science,” a term popularized by Alvin Weinberg in a 1972 article. Trans-science is the domain of factual questions that science should ask (e.g., the effects of low-level radiation exposure), but which, as a practical matter, science cannot answer. Expert assessments of such questions are inevitably intertwined with values and politics. Weinberg noted that coping with the resulting challenges requires the “development of better institutions” (p. 147). Eyal agrees, and while he says little about which direction such efforts should go, his book offers an instructive account of the many hazards they face.

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