

POPULISM, DEMOCRATIC
EXPERIMENTALISM, AND
NEOLIBERALISM'S
EPISTEMIC CHALLENGE TO
DEMOCRACY

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Liberal democracies are experiencing a deep epistemic crisis (Dahlgreen 2018). Trumpism, the rise of Covid-conspiracy theories, distrust in media coverage, and lacking agreement among citizens about basic aspects of reality are only the more obvious phenomena affecting the current state of public debate (Stanley 2015, D’Ancona 2017). In many respects, this situation not fully new. Truth and knowledge have always had an ambivalent status in democratic societies (Arendt 2006, Vogelmann 2018, Rosenfeld 2020). However, the current crisis has several specific features resulting from the hegemony of the neoliberal expertocratic project, the challenges of digital technologies, the growing distance between science and citizens, the marketization of information, and the incapacity of epistemic authorities to adequately address social injustice and inequalities (Kitcher 2011, Fuller 2017, D’Ancona 2017).

These challenges threaten democracy in its very existence since they have contributed to the erosion of its two basic epistemological conditions: the intellectual trust

of citizens on epistemic authorities (including fellow citizens), and more basically, the orientation towards some (even minimal) idea of truth (Rosenfeld 2020).

In this context, several political-epistemic projects have come to the fore as candidates with the power to restore the epistemological foundations of democracy. Though in different ways and to different degrees, they have in common that they reclaim the value of the wisdom of ordinary citizens, whose recognition they see as a fundamental step to achieving intellectual trust and (even minimal) truth-orientation in democratic societies.

Firstly, right- and left-wing populist movements appeal to the wisdom of the crowd against the “abstract” and “corrupt” knowledge of the elites (Werner-Müller 2015, Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017, Rosanvallon 2021). Populist epistemologies often include complex and self-contradicting phenomena ranging from trust in “alternative experts” or conspiracy theories, to trust in one’s own judgement against social beliefs. They represent attempts at counteracting neoliberalism’s expertocratic aims, even if often they have

contributed to further eroding intellectual trust and truth-orientation.

Secondly, liberal positions react to the current epistemic crisis by appealing to the old liberal ideal of knowledge aggregation. Here the wisdom of ordinary citizens is appealed to as participants in the marketplace of ideas. This view is reflected in the range of different strategies liberal authors propose to defeat post-truth, including fake-news-detecting algorithms, the enhancement of digital culture among individuals to be able to discern between good and bad information, or promoting emotionally charged discourses to appeal to individuals' truth-orientation (D'Ancona 2017, Adler & Drieskova 2021).

Thirdly, proponents of an open democracy and democratic innovations search for more democratic forms of political representation (Smith 2009, Landemore 2021). They aim at bringing back citizens to the core of representative institutions based on the idea that the diversity of perspectives enhances the quality of collective decisions. Truth-orientation and intellectual trust should be

promoted by closing the gap between citizen's participation and citizen's representation.

Finally, democratic experimentalism, often in combination with feminist, post-colonial, and environmentalist movements, finds in examples such as Zapatismo, the indignados, or current struggles for human rights and against climate change the instantiation of more critical, socially substantial, and pluralist political epistemology (Sousa Santos 2014, Sabel 2012, Anderson 2001, 2014, Medina 2013, Frega 2019, Serrano Zamora 2021, Serrano Zamora & Herzog 2021).

Each of the candidates holds (more or less) coherent sets of epistemological assumptions. I call these sets "epistemological-political orientations" (EPOs). EPOs influence the choices political actors make about the epistemic authorities that should have a say in processes of democratic problem-solving (should we listen to journalists, scientists, to priests, or to those directly affected in order to solve a collective problem?) as well as the typical practices of knowledge-production political actors enact (should we, for example, consult a private company, organize a public

conference, attend an expert workshop, or participate in a citizen assembly to find out about where to install solar panels in our town?). Accordingly, if one of these four projects – or a combination of them – becomes hegemonic as the way out of the epistemic crisis of democracy, we can expect that this will influence three (interlinked) spheres of epistemic cooperation: the internal organization of expert knowledge-production (how should scientists interact, for example, regarding the possibility of bias in their own research?), the epistemic communication between experts and citizens (how much should citizens and scientists cooperate as epistemic actors?), and the organization of problem-solving practices by political actors (How should democratic publics solve their collective problems?).

As philosophers with an interest in the fate of democracy we have the task to characterize, evaluate, and explore the conditions of implementation of these four candidates – i.e. populism, liberalism, democratic representation, and democratic experimentalism – from the point of view of their capacity to counteract the eroding tendencies affecting the epistemic foundations of

democracy. This does not mean having to choose one of the available candidates as the only valid one but, rather, exploring what are the potentials and the limits of each and look for potential hybridizations. Neither does this mean taking as a standard for evaluation the ideals of truth and knowledge we have inherited from Europe's Enlightenment without submitting them to a fundamental criticism. Nor does it mean coming back to an ideal situation that never existed previously to the epistemic crisis. Hence, it has been correctly argued by feminism and postcolonial views that Enlightenment's ideals are themselves problematic for sustaining certain forms of injustice, playing a role in the current epistemic crisis. Rather, exploring the potentials of these candidates involves evaluating them in their capacity to promote trust and truth-orientation under conditions of deep epistemic pluralism (Sousa Santos 2014), and the ability to account for the necessary critical attitudes that unmask injustices and other social pathologies (Celikates 2018, Haslanger 2021). These conditions need to be brought to the center of our analysis since deep epistemic pluralism

and pervasive social injustices are at the root of the current epistemic crisis.

Democratic Experimentalism Is Not Populism

The task I propose here – and which I can only point to in this brief article – should also contribute to enlightening current public debates, since too often political projects that reclaim the value of citizens’ knowledge are merely perceived as populist. This is particularly urgent for the case of democratic experimentalism, which is often either made invisible or conflated with populism by political analysts as well as the media. One of the reasons for this is that both, populism, and democratic experimentalism represent forms of popular reaction to the effects of neoliberalization that have emerged “from below.” Both aim at renewing institutional politics (*la politique*) from the forces of a non-institutionalized street politics (*le politique*) (Ogien and Laugier 2014). Both for populists and democratic experimentalists it is not only a question of criticizing outdated institutions and a deficient model of representative democracy, but also of proposing – sometimes in a pre-

figurative way in their own forms of organization – alternatives to the expertocratic epistemological model.

However, both projects must be clearly differentiated since their democratic potentials as well as the potential to promote epistemic trust and a minimal sense of truth orientation clearly differ (Serrano Zamora & Santarelli 2021). Here I will mention only two central differences among them. Firstly, populism underestimates the epistemic value of the application of rational methods and orients itself towards forms of immediate experience such as experiential proximity (“I know it because I have experienced it”), spontaneity (“I know it because no consistent and reflective method was implemented”) and emotional proximity (“I know it because I feel it with intensity”). In contrast, democratic experimentalism holds that the three forms of immediacy (i.e., experiential proximity, spontaneity, and emotional intensity) can be articulated with rational processes and methods of knowledge production. For experimentalists, and contrary to populist premises also shared by neoliberals, implementing reflective methods is not incompatible with

using these sources of knowledge that are commonly attributed to “the people.” Instead of absolutizing and contraposing “rational method” or “immediate, popular, everyday experience” as neoliberals and populist do, democratic experimentalism understands these aspects as phases of a complex and plural knowledge process where experts and citizens can explore a variety of forms of epistemic cooperation.

Secondly, democratic experimentalism distances itself from both the atomistic model of populism (knowledge as belonging to the isolated individual) and liberal aggregativism (knowledge as the mere sum of individual beliefs) and proposes to understand the production of knowledge as a cooperative process that includes various forms of epistemic cooperation. As Helen Longino states, epistemic cooperativism “stresses the interdependence of cognitive agents and subjects. This characterization of knowledge subjects as interdependent carries with it the idea of individual subjects without individualism” (2002: 91). This approach to epistemic practice clearly differs from populism, for which knowledge

is gained either in isolation from other epistemic peers or in fusion with the whole community. Here it should be noted that speaking of cooperation should not lead us to think that the production of knowledge should be a conflict-free process. On the contrary, democratic experimentalists see conflicts, in the form of social mobilizations, for example, as elements that make it possible to contrast perspectives, articulate interpretations, and generate new ways of disclosing aspects of the world.

Against hegemonic public discourse it is urgent to show that a democratizing and emancipatory project of vindication of popular knowledge can draw from the potential of current democratic experimentalist experiences that, strictly speaking, are not part of a populist culture. This alternative tradition draws its sources from pragmatism, liberal socialism, as well as for feminist and post-colonial epistemologies (Santos 2014). It is rooted in many social movements and socialist-democratic political struggles the origin of which goes back at least to the times of the French Revolution.

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