

EXPERTS AND CITIZENS IN
THE TIMES OF COVID-19:
A DEWEYAN PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the surface many of the pervasive imbalances, pathologies and dysfunctionalities that usually remain more or less invisible in democratic societies. While structural inequalities in the access to goods and vaccination, work-conditions and ways of life are becoming more evident than ever in the varying infection rates affecting different social groups, major difficulties concerning the way societies organize the production and implementation of knowledge have become particularly pressing. More particularly, the distance existing between citizens and experts has turned into one of the major difficulties our societies have to cope with. Citizens are not only not familiarized with the tempos, the methods, and the language of science, but they exercise forms of public pressure that often negatively affect the quality of scientific research. In the worst cases, some even reject the conclusions of scientific research in ways that reflect a

general suspicion about the “real” interests of academics, scientists, and other experts. At the same time, scientists seem not to be always in line with the concerns, the values, as well as with the ordinary experiences of citizens, whose life science and expertise is supposed to ameliorate. Even if this latter problem affects experts of different disciplines with varying intensity, it has become evident that often scientists miss valuable lessons about their practice and the results of their research when they fully disconnect from the society in which their activity is embedded.¹

The contribution neoliberal politics has made to the present state of affairs is evident, even if not fully new.² For neoliberal experts, rightly turning away from citizens’ goals, experiences, and values, pursue objective knowledge bearing on the well-being of society at large. The apparently insurmountable distance lying between scientists and the citizenry is replicated by the populist reaction against neoliberalism. Hence, populism raises the suspicion that

¹ See: Philipp Kitcher, *Science in a Democratic Society* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2011).

² See: Sophia Rosenfeld, *Democracy and Truth: a Short History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), Chap. 2.

scientists in their research respond to their own interests as well as those of the elites. Simultaneously, populists tend to “trust in the wisdom of ordinary people (rather) than the opinions of experts and intellectuals.”³ In this way, both neoliberal and populist politics increase the distance lying between scientists and experts, making the cooperation between both into an impossible task.

Against this background, John Dewey’s philosophy can provide a different way of understanding the relation between experts and citizens in democracy. Hence, from a Deweyan perspective, instead of having two fundamentally different approaches to knowledge, citizens’ and experts’ inquiries must be treated as being in a relation of continuity. As a consequence, citizens can learn from the knowledge and the methods generated in the scientific production of economists, sociologists, biologists, climate-change theorists, or even philosophers and act accordingly in their everyday practices. But it also means that experts can learn from citizens, both regarding the ordinary experiences of

³ Niels G. Mede and Mike S. Schäfer, “Science-Related Populism: Conceptualizing Populist Demands toward Science,” *Public Understanding of Science* 29, no. 5 (July 2020): 473–491 and 474.

the latter as well as the methods and the knowledge generated in informal settings of collective inquiry like public discussions, social movements, and civic organizations. Certainly, the flourishing of such a relation of mutual cooperation and learning depends on the self-understanding of experts and citizens as political and social actors. Dewey's philosophy can help us to give theoretical foundation to the experts-citizen cooperation, thereby changing the terms by which we frame the debate about the role of experts in political will formation and decision-making.

Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to spell out, based on John Dewey's pragmatist approach to politics, an alternative to neoliberalism and populism that has the idea of epistemic cooperation between scientists and citizens at its core. In order to carry out this task, we will follow three steps. In the first section we show that neoliberalism and populism, despite their obvious differences, share a common premise, namely, the assumption that scientists and lay citizens have two fundamentally different, incompatible approaches to knowledge. From this

background, each of them tends to absolutize the value of either scientific knowledge (neoliberalism) or citizens' knowledge (populism), bringing each of them and society at large into serious trouble. In the second section, we present Dewey's alternative to populism and neoliberalism. Pragmatism avoids separating and absolutizing any of the two poles by pointing to the continuity between science and ordinary inquiry. Drawing on the famous Dewey-Lippmann debate, we argue for the use of institutional imagination for figuring out institutional arrangements organizing the cooperation between scientists and lay citizens. In a final step, we explore particular ways in which scientific progress has been linked to citizens' epistemic achievements, namely, through "politicization" of apparently value-neutral issues such as certain health issues. More concretely, we show that politicization of HIV has generated valuable knowledge for scientific research. Here we see how, apart from institutional innovations, social struggles themselves represents a valuable source of the de-absolutization of knowledge and the promotion of epistemic cooperation.

1. The Populist Reaction to Neoliberal Expertocracy

In view of the populist rise against current expertocratic forms of governance, the question of how much decision-making power experts should have in democratic societies has become a relevant topic in public debate.⁴ A less discussed, though not less important issue in the background of this debate is the question about what should be the *epistemic* relation between the activities of experts and those of citizens. Hence, both for populism and neoliberals there seems to be an insurmountable distance between the ways they both approach knowledge. For neoliberals, experts are in charge of developing rational methods and acquiring objective knowledge about the world. In contrast to experts, citizens show serious epistemic limitations which make them unsuitable for figuring out what should be done. As Joseph Schumpeter put it once, “the typical citizen drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he

⁴ See, for example: Andrea Lavazza and Mirko Farina, “The Role of Experts in the Covid-19 Pandemic and the Limits of Their Epistemic Authority in Democracy,” *Frontiers in Public Health* 8 (July 14, 2020): 356–356.

enters the political field...He becomes a primitive again.”⁵

Among these limitations we should count those Walter Lippmann described in his book on public opinion (see next section). Thus, experts work at their best when they are disconnected from emotions, political partisanship, and the unreflective experiences of citizens.

Current forms of populism have reacted against this view raising doubts about the apparent objectivity and neutrality of experts. Hence, populists often believe that scientific research and expertise are aligned with the interests of the powerful elite. As Sophia Rosenfeld puts it,

in the standard populist narrative, the key discovery... is that the people have been betrayed by the very individuals in whom they had put their trust.... While these people might look and act like independent brokers of truth and demand the confidence of others based on their institutional credentials or their wealth, they are actually partisan,

⁵ Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2013), 262.

self-interested, and corrupt as they try hard to defend an indefensible status quo.⁶

Apart from partisanship, self-interest, and corruption, experts' work is also deeply flawed by its permanent disconnection from citizens' life experiences, values and emotions. This makes them into a "closed epistemic community"⁷ where "experts talk exclusively among themselves," barricading themselves off from the public.⁸ At the same time, populists⁹ complain that, instead of being taken seriously as bearers of valuable knowledge, citizens are despised as mere passive receivers of knowledge – or as fundamentally non-epistemic actors. Against this view, populists usually take a double stance that points to an apparent contradiction. On the one hand, they come close

⁶ Rosenfeld, *Democracy and Truth*, 100.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁹ In the wake of Rosenfeld, we will use the term "populists" in general terms. Yet, it should be pointed out that right-wing populists have been more systematic and adamant in their suspicion than left-wing populists in their suspicion about scientific expertise.

to the line of neoliberalism in considering popular movements as moved by emotions that have little if no cognitive value. This is the case, not only of right-wing populism but also of some versions of left-populism. Indeed, some left-wing parties and or/politicians are deeply inspired by Ernesto Laclau, whose strong emphasis on rhetorical processes risks downplaying the role of inquiry and cognitive processes in political life.¹⁰ On the other hand, however, populists also vindicate the political value of the wisdom of ordinary people.¹¹ In Rosenfeld's words, for populists

the solution [to neoliberalism's problems] involves rejecting ostensibly objective expertise and all the institutions, values, norms, procedures, and people that expertise goes with and valorizing a combination

¹⁰ See: Matteo Santarelli and Justo Serrano Zamora, "The Affective Side of Political Identities. Between Pragmatism and European Social Theory," in *Pragmatism and Social Philosophy. Exploring a Stream of Ideas From America to Europe*, ed. Michael Festl (New York and Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2020).

¹¹ J. Eric Oliver and Wendy M. Rahn, "Rise of the Trumpenvolk: Populism in the 2016 Election," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, August 17, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716216662639>: 189-206.

of quotidian experience and the feelings, impulses, beliefs, and intuitions of ordinary people instead.¹²

Populists invert neoliberalism's relation between experts and citizens by attributing to the latter indisputable knowledge. This knowledge draws from the immediate experiences and intuitions of everyday life. As Rosenfeld and other authors have remarked, there is certainly something valuable in populism's critique against the current division of epistemic labor promoted by neoliberal politics. Hence, there is clearly an epistemic loss deriving from the self-enclosure of the scientific community and the rejection of popular wisdom which has had clear negative consequences for citizens. Examples of the consequences of this epistemic deficit can be found at different historical moments when experts have directed policies avoiding public control. Rosenfeld provides the example of how colonial institutions tried to change the structure of agricultural economy in India without taking into account the experiences and forms of life of the population. But this

¹² Rosenfeld, *Democracy and Truth*, 99.

is only one of many examples of the effects of expertocratic forms of government.¹³ Furthermore, there is a further reason for abandoning the neoliberal view. By denying recognition of the epistemic value of citizens' everyday experiences, emotions, and intuitions neoliberalism contributes to what we could call a "bewilderment" of citizens' ordinary inquiries. By bewilderment we mean the lack of any mechanisms of self-reflection, control, and correction of procedures by which knowledge is acquired and gains validity. When citizens' own inquiries are not recognized as valuable, when citizens are not seen as epistemic actors in their own right, they are deprived of an essential source of motivation for caring about the quality and the public validity of their views.

Though due to inverse reasons, this bewilderment of public inquiry is replicated by populist's particular vindication of the value of popular knowledge. Hence, by rejecting scientific research and expertise, populism also

¹³ For another example, see Pierluigi Barrotta and Eleonora Montuschi, "The Dam Project. Who are the Experts? A Philosophical Lesson from the Vajont Disaster," in *Science and Democracy: Controversies and Conflicts*, ed. Pierluigi Barrotta (Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishers), 17-34.

rejects the value of rational procedures and methods for the production of knowledge. Instead, populists defend a notion of immediate and revealed knowledge.¹⁴ Accordingly, popular wisdom does not need to be generated by rational procedures. As immediate, it only needs to be given public expression by the revelation of truths. One obvious consequence of this approach to popular knowledge is that it makes the epistemic activity of citizens prone to manipulation by leaders who claim to be the representatives of this revealed truth.

2. Scientists and Citizens in the Times of COVID-19

In light of this, a pragmatist approach to politics provides a plausible alternative between the epistemology of populism and that of neoliberalism. Hence, in contrast to neoliberalism, pragmatism is aware of the epistemic value of citizens' ordinary experiences. Moreover, it also attributes epistemic value to the methods and knowledge generated by citizens when they inquire at different local levels of social

¹⁴ Rosenfield, *Democracy and Truth*, 101.

interaction such as the civil society. However, in contrast to populism, pragmatism is far from offering an absolutistic approach to these local experiences, methods, and knowledge(s), one that takes them as incontestable and immediate truths. Rather, it argues for a cooperation between different epistemic actors, from scientists to citizens that would promote mutual corrections and learning processes. In other words, it argues for a community of inquiry, or better said, for a community of communities of inquiry where scientists and citizens work together and learn from each other.

The concept of the public is probably the most effective contribution that Dewey's social philosophy can offer to the topic here at stake. It is not a matter of chance that the most detailed elaboration of this concept can be found in *The Public and its Problem*, a book that directly intervenes in the debate on the relationship between experts, non-experts, and democracy in the USA at the end of the 1920s. The genesis of this volume is quite well known. Dewey wrote *The Public and its Problems* "in the spirit of

debate and disagreement”¹⁵ with Walter Lippmann. In his books *Public Opinion* (1922) and *The Phantom Public* (1925) Lippmann articulates both his diagnosis and his cure for the diseases affecting American democracy at that time. Lippmann believes that citizens’ public and democratic deliberation and its importance should be curtailed for at least three reasons. Firstly, citizens make political decisions based on stereotypes, rather than on reflexive and intelligent deliberations. Secondly, the most deeply rooted opinions of the individual are inaccessible to the processes of public and democratic deliberation. Thirdly, political and economic interest groups can easily manipulate the stereotyped and affectively charged beliefs of citizens. In this way, these groups can legitimize their interests through the very processes of democratic deliberation that they themselves have manipulated, representing these particular interests as the common interests of the people, deliberated on by the citizens themselves. In this way, an excess of democracy leads to the triumph of a concealed particularism, in which

¹⁵ Melvin Rogers, “Revisiting *The Public and Its Problems*,” in John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems. An Essay in Political Inquiry* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016), 5.

citizens unwittingly work to legitimize the private interests of groups of influence. In order to save democracy from itself, Lippmann proposes to limit the power of (supposedly) democratic deliberations and to strengthen the role of experts. Because of their social role and their scientific and intellectual background, experts are in a better position to articulate and solve social problems, without being subject to the manipulations to which the lay-persons inevitably fall prey. In order to counteract the power of interest groups and the risks of oligarchic degeneration of democracy, Lippmann's strict prescription is: less democracy, more experts.

In *The Public and its Problems* Dewey takes the problem posed by Lippmann extremely seriously. He agrees that democratic processes are fragile and constantly exposed to the risk of manipulation. At the same time, his solution is radically different. Two differences should be highlighted. Firstly, according to Dewey, the entanglement between the affective and the rational dimension dreaded by Lippmann is in some ways inherent in political life. This emerges vividly from his definition of public: "The public consists of

all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for.”¹⁶ The affective dimension therefore plays a central role in the constitution of the public in at least two points. Firstly, there is a public only if a group feels affected, concerned by certain social transactions. Secondly, the public is not expected to solve a specific social problem on a merely intellectual level. The public has to solve a problem by taking care at the same time of the concerns prompted by this problem. In a nutshell: the intellectual activity of the public – in Dewey’s jargon: inquiry – aims at fulfilling two tasks: articulating and solving a problem; articulating the concerns of a specific groups into common interests: “The prime difficulty, as we have seen, is that of discovering the means by which a scattered and manifold public may so recognize itself as to

¹⁶ John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925 - 1953: 1925-1927, Essays, Reviews, Miscellany, and The Public and Its Problems*, The Collected Works of John Dewey, vol. 2, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 246.

define and express its interests.”¹⁷ Consequently, Dewey believes that the practices of inquiry of the public are simply inconceivable without an affective attachment to the situation and the problems that emerge from it. The public is concerned by something, and take care of its consequences. Overlooking these concerns and this caring does not entail achieving a higher degree of objectivity and rationality. Rather, it simply means portraying social and political life in an unrealistic and misleading way.

Secondly, in contrast to Lippmann Dewey believes that the lack of cooperation between experts and laypersons is likely to have negative consequences both on a political level and on an epistemological level. On a political level, this lack of cooperation risks ruling out either experts or non-experts from political and deliberative processes – respectively, what we have previously depicted as the populist and the neoliberal scenarios. On an epistemological level, a lack of involvement of citizens does not entail any guarantee of the objectivity of the process and the results of inquiry. Quite on the contrary: “No government by experts

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 327.

in which the masses do not have the chance to inform the experts as to their needs can be anything but an oligarchy managed in the interests of the few.”¹⁸ Here Dewey does not want to dismiss the role and the importance of experts. Rather, he believes that preventing “the masses” from informing the experts entails an epistemological impoverishment of the process of inquiry.¹⁹

Dewey’s point is quite original and meaningful for the issue here at stake. From a Deweyan perspective, expertocracy risks being counterproductive at the level where its supporters believe that this solution is more effective, i.e., the epistemological level. The alleged dichotomy experts vs. people blows up. The point is not choosing between substantial democracy and science, between participation and epistemological authority. Rather, it is about improving democracy *and* science at the same time. A lack of cooperation between experts and laypersons is a danger both for democracy and for science. Both

¹⁸ Ibid., 365.

¹⁹ For a contemporary re-interpretation of the Dewey-Lippmann debate, see: Barbara Stiegler, “*Il faut s’adapter.*” *Sur un nouvel impératif politique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2019).

poles of the dichotomy expertocracy-populism contribute to this danger, by denying in principle the possibility that respect for science and its findings is compatible with the participation of non-experts in the processes of inquiry.

But how would this cooperation be possible at all? We have already mentioned that, according to Dewey, the presence of emotions in public life does not represent an obstacle to cooperation. Rather, it represents a necessary condition for the possibility of rational public inquiries. However, neoliberalism's and populism's reasons to reject the possibility of a cooperation between citizens and experts do not only concern the role of emotions in inquiry. As we saw in the previous section, both neoliberalism and populism share a similar premise, namely, that scientists and citizens have two essentially different approaches to knowledge. Neoliberalism believes that, by following rational procedures, scientists gain an objective perspective on social issues which should have the last say on any issues of public concern. In contrast to this account, populism only seems to trust the value of the "immediate" experiences of citizens.

In contrast to both epistemologies, Dewey's view draws on the more fundamental premise of a continuity between scientist's and citizen's approaches to knowledge. According to Dewey, science is, firstly, embedded in common sense experience. Abstracting from it can only have negative consequences for its own epistemic purposes. Secondly, science enriches common sense in ways the latter cannot develop for itself. Both ideas become clear in Dewey's characterization of the relation between science and common sense:

(1) Scientific subject-matter and procedures grow out of the direct problems and methods of the common sense, of practical uses and enjoyments, and (2) react into the latter in a way that enormously refines, expands and liberates the contents and the agencies at the disposal of common sense. The separation and opposition of scientific subject-matter to that of common sense, when it is taken to be final, generates those controversial problems of epistemology and metaphysics that still dog the course of philosophy. When scientific subject-matter is seen to bear genetic

and functional relation to the subject-matter of common sense, these problems disappear. Scientific subject-matter is intermediate, not final and complete in itself.²⁰

For Dewey, cooperation between experts and citizens is both necessary and possible. It is necessary, because only through cooperation can they overcome the epistemic deficits emerging from self-isolation and absolutization of each form of knowledge. Abstracting from the views and methods of common sense, scientists lose touch with the ground in which their activity is embedded. By this they fail to produce knowledge that can be used for the effective regulation of social affairs. By rejecting science, common sense rejects an extremely valuable source of enrichment of our everyday experience. Cooperation is also possible, because both approaches to knowledge are not fundamentally different but stand in continuity with each

²⁰ John Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey, Volume 12, 1925 - 1953: 1938, Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, The Collected Works of John Dewey, vol. 12, ed. Jo Ann Boyston (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 71-72.

other. As Dewey puts it, even if the kinds of problems they are concerned with are different, the logical difference between them concerns the emphasis put in different phases of inquiry. Against neoliberal epistemology, pragmatism holds that science cannot properly do its job – namely, provide us with valuable methods and knowledge of the (social) world – if it abstracts from common sense's experiences and methods. Against populism, common sense should not be understood as an immediate access to knowledge, whose truth can only be revealed. On the contrary, common sense also develops its own methods and instrumentalities for inquiry, which can be of value for scientific research.

From this perspective, what can it mean for current institutions and practices to promote the cooperation between scientists and citizens? This question has been largely explored by political scientists aiming at developing participatory institutional designs. As H el ene Landemore has put it,

Political scientists and sociologists have thus documented in the last ten years the success of

“hybrid forums” mixing experts and lay people, as well as that of the Danish “consensus conferences” (Callon, Lasoumbes and Bathe 2001). Even more compelling evidence of popular wisdom can also be found in Citizens’ Assemblies (Warren and Pearse 2008) and James Fishkin and Robert Luskin’s (2005) deliberative polls [...]. In all these experiments, experts admit being impressed by both the quality of the discussions and the nuanced conclusions reached by groups of self-professed amateurs. The results of these experiments thus suggest that including more popular input would at worst not harm the quality of the decisions and at best enhance them.²¹

What should be clear by now is that those institutional innovations promoting epistemic cooperation should not only promote citizens learning from the contents and the methods of science. Moreover, science should also be able to learn from common sense. Regarding this latter issue, we

²¹ Hélène Landemore, *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 14.

can then identify at least four dimensions of scientists-citizen cooperation. The first dimension is best captured by Philip Kitcher's idea of a well-ordered science. According to Kitcher²² (and to Dewey) the research goals and interests of scientists are never set from a "neutral" point of view. Rather, they respond to social interests and values. In democratic societies, the possibility that these goals and interests are established unilaterally by a particular social group must – for example, the economic elite – be counteracted by ensuring that citizens can have a say in those goals and interests. A well-ordered science is then organized according to the values and goals of a citizenry which has deliberated about what is socially important to know. Secondly, and in connection to the first dimension, cooperating with citizens is also necessary if science is to make visible and overcome the biases that pervade its research activities. A well-known example concerns the social, economic, cultural, and political risks related to the development of digital technologies, more particularly of algorithms, such as those denounced by Kathy O'Neil in

²² See: Kitcher, *Science in a Democratic Society*.

Weapons of Math Destruction.²³ Thirdly, citizens may provide valuable input at different stages of the inquiry process. This might include providing feedback about the consequences of the implementation of certain policies, but also providing situated perspectives useful for the formulation of problems and policies directed at solving them.²⁴ Finally, citizens, especially when they organize in civil society develop their own methods, regarding epistemic operations such as fact-gathering as well as implementation and testing of hypotheses. In a nutshell, one might say that social movements represent powerful methodological innovators with the potential of challenging hegemonic forms of inquiry into social problems.²⁵

Science should learn from the deliberations, values, inputs, and methods of ordinary citizens. An important

²³ Cathy O'Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* (London: Penguin Books, 2017).

²⁴ Elizabeth Anderson, "The Epistemology of Democracy," *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology* 3, no. 1 (2006): 8–22.

²⁵ Justo Serrano Zamora, *Democratization and Struggles Against Injustice. A Pragmatist Approach to the Epistemic Practices in Social Movements* (London, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

consequence of the view that scientists can learn from citizens is that contemporary societies need to develop institutional innovations promoting robust cooperation between them. However, institutional solutions may not always be possible nor fully effective in promoting robust cooperation. In many cases, and particularly, in situations of structural domination where certain social groups have little if any access to public discussion, social movements represent not only sources of valuable knowledge but also effective ways of promoting epistemic cooperation. More specifically, here we want to defend the idea that, contrary to what is commonly believed, the “politicization” of certain social issues on the side of social movements does not necessarily have negative consequences at the epistemological level. Rather, politicization of a phenomenon by a public sometimes goes hand in hand with a better scientific knowledge of the phenomenon. This thesis may seem controversial in the era of COVID-19, and therefore deserves further investigation.

3. Politicization and Scientific Knowledge: A Potentially Happy Marriage?

Today, the concept of politicization seems to enjoy bad press. On July 8th, 2020, *The New York Times* published a detailed article by columnist Thomas B. Edsall, whose unambiguous title was: “How Could Human Nature have become this Politicized?”. The idea underlying this piece and other articles is that the politicization of a purely biological phenomenon such as COVID-19 is at odds with the spirit of scientific research. It is not only useless, but even harmful to the health of millions of people, to approach the handling of a virus through the categories of political partisanship. Instead of wasting time with political categories and conflicts, it is better to leave the floor to the experts. In the specific case under discussion – the management of the COVID-19 emergency by the Trump presidency – one can agree with these criticisms. At the same time, it is possible to doubt that these contextual criticisms can be applied to politicization in general. Specifically, it is worth noting that these criticisms presuppose a distinct definition of

politicization, understood as polarization. It is beyond doubt that polarization plays a growing role in contemporary politics – see for instance Campbell’s analysis of polarization in contemporary America.²⁶ Still, this does not entail that polarization is the only meaning of the word “politicization” currently available. For example, one can politicize an issue by making it politically relevant, or by placing it as the issue of a conflict that does not necessarily take the dichotomous form characterizing polarizations²⁷. In the case of these politicizations, which are not necessarily polarizing, the relationship between political activity and scientific activity appears less problematic. Rather, in some of these cases the politicization of an issue creates a public – in Dewey’s sense

²⁶ James E. Campbell, *Polarized: Making Sense of a Divided America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

²⁷ See for instance the definition of discursive politicization introduced by Wood and Flinders. Discursive politicization is here understood as the process through which an issue becomes the object of conflict and contestability. While these conflicts are often shaped and organized in dichotomic terms, it is still possible to make an issue contestable without framing it in polarized terms. See Matt Wood, Matthew Flinders, “Rethinking Depoliticisation: Beyond the Governmental”, *Policy & Politics*, 2014, 42(2): 151-170.

– whose inquiry activities have positive effects also in terms of scientific knowledge.

In his 1999 paper *Democracy as Inquiry, Inquiry as Democratic: Pragmatism, Social Science, and the Cognitive Division of Labor* James Bohman discussed a case of this kind: the politicization of AIDS by gay activism. In line with his previous works²⁸ Bohman clearly singles out both the core of pragmatist political philosophy – the transformation of both science and democracy – and its central difficulty – the organization of the epistemic division of labor.²⁹ Once it is acknowledged that social inquiry is a cooperative endeavor in which people play different roles, it is still to be explained how to define and delimit these roles. How should we deal with the unavoidable asymmetries of knowledge, skills, and competences? Can the credibility of experts be put into question by lay-persons? Should the knowledge produced by lay-persons be taken into account by experts? And if yes, to

²⁸ See: James Bohman, “Public Reason and Cultural Pluralism: Political Liberalism and the Problem of Moral Conflict,” *Political Theory* 23, no. 2 (1995): 253–279.

²⁹ James Bohman, “Democracy as Inquiry, Inquiry as Democratic: Pragmatism, Social Science, and the Cognitive Division of Labor,” *American Journal of Political Science* (1999): 591.

which extent? According to Bohman, pragmatists often underestimate how difficult it is to achieve an open interchange between experts and lay-persons, and how hard it is to solve conflicts stemming from asymmetries of information and skills. Still, these difficulties are not insurmountable, in contrast to what advocates of political realism believe.³⁰ A concrete example points to the way in which these difficulties can be overcome.

The example cited by Bohman, i.e., AIDS activism, shows clearly how political activism can lead to improvements at both a political and a scientific level. It is now well known that during the first years after the appearance of AIDS the mainstream ideas of scientists on its diffusion and on contagion processes were heavily influenced by stereotyped prejudices about the social and sexual life of gay men.³¹ These prejudices have had

³⁰ For a pragmatist overview and critical discussion of these positions, see: Roberto Frega, *Pragmatism and the Wide View of Democracy* (Basingtoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019).

³¹ See: Peter Hegarty, “Materializing the Hypothalamus: A Performative Account of the Gay Brain’,” *Feminism & Psychology* 7, no. 3 (1997): 355–372; see also: Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?: And Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

detrimental effects on both the theoretical and practical level, for example, inducing an underestimation of the risk of contagion in heterosexual or lesbian sexual intercourses. In order to challenge these beliefs, and therefore to achieve a more accurate knowledge of the virus and the processes of contagion, it was necessary to have political activism of publics who challenged the prejudices underlying these beliefs and the practical ways of prevention and treatment of the patients.

But as Bohman points out, the role of activism was not limited to simple political pressure external to scientific research in the strict sense of the term, inducing researchers to drop off cultural biases and to achieve a “neutral” standpoint. Here one of the key points of Dewey’s social theory and epistemology comes into play, namely the means-ends entanglement. AIDS activist groups have not limited themselves to challenging the aims of scientific research on AIDS – to provide support and care for the sick without condemning them to unnecessary suffering and social isolation, and to propose effective and realistic measures against contagion. Rather, they intervened

concretely in the concrete means of scientific research. AIDS activism had to deal with a situation in which institutions were not initially responsive to the needs and the concerns of the emergent public of those affected by AIDS.³² What is interesting is that activist groups contested the epistemic criteria adopted by researchers without contesting their expertise in itself.

An important issue of conflict in this regard was the experimentation with drugs. While researchers adopted high standards of statistical significance, activists were prone to adopt lower standards of validity in order to have a quicker and wider access to experimental drugs. As trials require active cooperation of the patients, activist groups used this necessity as a leverage for negotiation. In Mary Parker Follett's jargon,³³ in the medium run this negotiation and compromise gave rise to an integration: a cooperative social inquiry in which expertise can be challenged on some level, without being contested in itself. In this case, there is

³² Bohman, "Democratic Inquiry," 600.

³³ See: Mary Parker Follett, *Dynamic Administration; The Collected Papers of Mary Parker Follett*, ed. Henry C. Metcalf and L. Urwick (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1942).

no necessary opposition between science and democracy, expertise, and activism. Rather, politicization played an active and positive role in both social and scientific inquiry. But can these remarks be valid and useful also in the case of COVID-19? Given the increasing rapidity and intensity of the contagion dynamics provoked by the new variants, and the urge to speeding up the vaccination process worldwide, does the politicization of the virus risk slowing down measures to safeguard the health of citizens, especially the weakest ones? Since this is a phenomenon in continuous evolution, it's impossible, and perhaps even epistemologically improper, to give definitive answers here. Yet, we would like to make some brief Dewey-inspired remarks that can be useful, at least methodologically.

Firstly, as the AIDS activism case clearly shows, politicization does not entail necessarily disregarding the epistemic authority of experts. Pointing to the political outcomes and consequences of a certain decision by the government does not entail neglecting the role of scientists. Assessing the different consequences of different restraint measures – or lack of restraint measures – on different social

groups and stating that these differences should be taken into account does not necessarily mean postulating an evil subject behind the appearance of COVID-19. Secondly, politicizing certain aspects of Covid policies does not mean denying the biological nature of the virus. Unlike what happens in the conspiracy theories, from a Deweyan point of view a phenomenon can be politicized without this leading to delusions of total human control of a phenomenon in many ways indifferent to our fate as human beings. Dewey's naturalism helps us here to recognize the character of contingency and uncertainty of the socio-biological reality in which we live. Thirdly, if it is true that the challenge of the coming years is to coexist with the virus, the cooperation between experts and lay-persons will become more and more decisive. Many of the decisions and actions of citizens in the coming months could not be fully delegated to experts and institutions. The decision whether or not to go to work with a cold; the decision whether or not to call the doctor if we have a little fever during the winter period, during which the health services risk being overloaded; the capacity of taking the correct medication in

the correct times after hospitalization, or if hospitalization is not possible: in all these cases, the relationship between expert and lay-person cannot be only that of delegation, but on the contrary must take the shape of a learning process. While this learning process involves asymmetries of knowledge, skills, and authority, the aforementioned case of AIDS activism shows how asymmetry does not entail necessarily lack of interaction, of mutual learning, and even of conflict. This coexistence between cooperation, conflict and epistemic division of labor appears as impossible in itself only if we limit our view to the expertocracy-populism dichotomy. A dichotomy that, as Dewey taught us many decades ago, is often politically, epistemologically and democratically dangerous.

Conclusion

In the times of COVID-19, the need for a closer cooperation between experts and citizens has become particularly pressing. This is the case not only because citizens are insufficiently familiar with the tempo, the methods, and the vocabulary of science, but also because scientists' own

success depends on the ordinary knowledge and methods of citizens. However, such a possibility is hindered by the two hegemonic political projects of the present time: neoliberalism and populism. According to both projects, experts and citizens have mutually incompatible approaches to knowledge and truth. Lying on two problematic epistemologies, neoliberalism and populism tend to absolutize the epistemic value of either experts' research or of citizens' ordinary inquiries and experiences. Against this view, Dewey shows that cooperation is not only necessary but also possible. While the necessity of cooperation is best captured in Dewey's response to Lippmann's challenges to democracy, its possibility is grounded in the premise of a continuity between science and ordinary inquiry – i.e., between the inquiries of experts and those of lay citizens. Accordingly, what is needed are institutional innovations that are able to promote and implement epistemic cooperation allowing for mutual learning and correction. Moreover, institutional innovations do not only need to address how citizens can learn from expertise and science. Moreover, they need to resolve question of how much

scientist should take into account the goals, values, methods, and views of citizens in their own research activities. The prospects of this learning process, however, do not only depend on institutional innovations but also on the capacity of civil society to organize and produce local methods and knowledge.³⁴ As we have seen in the case of AIDS activists, the politicization of certain issues in social struggles can often compensate for, if not fully reverse, the deficits that affect current institutional reality. When intelligently pursued, political struggle can contribute to the Deweyan ideal of epistemic cooperation.

³⁴ See for instance the growing movements for “citizen science” in the USA. For a general theoretical framework of these movements and their political engagement, see Harry Boyte, “Constructive Politics as Public Work,” *Political Theory* 39, no. 5 (2011): 630-660.