

Role of Scientific Experts in Modern Society

Before we have the experts speak on the role of scientific experts in modern society, let me share a few more general observations from a philosophical point of view. On first sight it looks as if the domain of science and that of society in general, or of politics in particular, belong to two different spheres, one limiting the other. Society, culture, politics mark the domain of human agency and hence of change whereas science is preoccupied with the unchangeable laws of nature. In a way, thus, science limits the domain of politics by delineating the sphere of things that politics has to accept as given, things over which there can not be any rational disagreement.

Stating this it becomes immediately apparent where can lie a possible source of misuse of science in political discourse and it is here that the problematic of ethics comes in: By representing something as scientific that in fact is not universally true, natural and unchanging, political discourse can obscure from view a possible domain of change and therefore collective agency and responsibility. This has been a common discursive “trick” ever since the enlightenment period where rules legitimizing the polity were represented by scholars as if they were laws of nature. Familiar terms such as “natural law”, the “state of nature” from where to derive the legal-ethical principles that govern society, “natural rights” etc. immediately come to mind. If the rules governing society are based on natural laws then politics is bound by them. Thus by way of representing certain legal, social, economical or historical phenomena as governed by natural laws of nature, the world of science takes precedence over the world of politics. Policies can be represented as necessary if they can be portrayed as in congruence with some alleged natural law. In this way, modernity has been represented as a “natural” process and so has been “secularisation”, “progress” or “globalisation”. There is nothing necessary or law-bound about these historical tendencies. They can continue, stall or reverse depending on contingent factors. But if they can be represented as if it were a natural process, they have to be taken into account by state and politics. They can then no longer be the

object of human agency. After all, politics as human agency can not change the laws of nature.

However what is presented as natural, universal and unchanging is often cultural, contingent and subject to historical change. This would normally be the domain of history or social sciences. However, even the social sciences have also sometimes fallen prey to a scientific attitude that naturalises the domain of the social and treats it on a par with natural phenomena. Here again the Enlightenment acted as a Godfather. Immanuel Kant distinguished ontologically between the domain of human agency and free will on one hand and the domain of natural law on the other. He did not take into account the domain of the cultural or the social as a separate ontological category where rules do obtain but where these rules are not hard and fast like natural laws but open to change by collective actors. It is this domain of collective agency that is the province of ethics. Norms govern society by way of generic rules. But in contrast to natural laws, these generic rules allow for exceptions. They have to be interpreted and applied by individual human beings, which leads to variation and change over time.

Norms that govern society are part of a social imaginary that transcends the individual human being. Norms can not be changed at will by individual actors alone. They thus represent themselves as hard and fast rules that society imposes on the individual. From the perspective of the collective, however, and from a political point of view, these rules are open to change. Representing them as natural laws only serves to limit the political debate over them. They serve the interests of those who do not like to be questioned or held responsible for make up of these norms.

Having this in mind, science and scientific experts have a particular responsibility not to lend themselves too easily to the legitimating function that science can have in political discourse. Social systems like science exert an eminent influence on the social imaginary and thereby on individual and collective actors like natural persons, nation states and organisations. Experts advise individual actors as to who they are, which goals they

should pursue and which means they have to employ to achieve them. Experts appeal to theories that are taken to be globally applicable, if not universally valid.

Moreover, as a social system that is not an actor but operates as a source of legitimacy, science exempts its innovators from bearing the costs and the risks of innovation. While science can freely alter the framework of the social imaginary which ontologically constitutes the actor and to which individual actors have to refer for their legitimacy, it is the actors alone who bear the economic burden of change and the consequence of failure. As an example we may think of the physicists who contributed to the development of nuclear technology and who are never held responsible for the horrific effects that this technology had in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As individual human beings, thought, experts are also ethically and politically responsible citizens. There should thus be a certain reflexivity in their self-understanding.

The scientific rationality that scientists produce not only influences the cultural basis for individual and state actors. It also furnishes the social imaginary with things to be taken as real. The ontology of the social imaginary has evolved to include formerly unknown things such as the “self” as an object of scientific observation. The acceptance of each of these as natural phenomena has consequences on the normative level. Since law, politics, and every social institution is justified, ultimately, with reference to the many citizen-selves that form society, individual citizens have to be placed in a position where they can bring to bear their responsibility for the whole of society. Thus the modern citizen can be thought of as a source of legitimacy and agency in one.

As a source of legitimacy unto itself, the sovereign individual has a share in shaping the norms governing society whose legitimacy ultimately rest on the consent of all citizens taken together. As an agent, in turn, the individual citizen is bound and legitimised by these very norms. However, the personal interests, private needs and secret desires of citizens may at times conflict with the role prescribed for them by society. This conflict has found its reflection in the classical dualisms of psychology, i.e. the ‘super-ego’ and the ‘id’ of Freudian psychology and the ‘me’ and ‘I’ in George Herbert Mead’s. The

‘ego’, the ‘self’ or ‘personal identity’ is the result of the dialectical mediation between the claims of society represented to the self through the generalised other, i.e. the ‘super-ego’ or the ‘me’. This mediation is never perfect since individual claims to self-expression always exceed the recognised patterns of conduct available through the framework of the social imaginary. The result is a “struggle for recognition” where new patterns are fought for and where the range of available models is consequently expanded and diversified.

A similar process of dialectical mediation between externally available models and internal raw interests is repeated on a higher plane in collective actors such as organisations and states when they form their collective identities or ‘selves’ as institutions. As institutionalised sources of legitimacy, as collective ‘super-egos’, as it were, experts play a central role in such processes of dialectical mediation. Their authority derives not from their strength as actors but from their ability to assimilate and develop the rationalised and universalistic knowledge that makes action and actorhood possible. This authority is organized in academic institutions and fora. As disciplines they are devoted to specific bodies of knowledge and their dissemination. Their rationalized knowledge structure constitute the “super-ego” of the modern world, replacing in good measure the older religions. Experts thus form the new “religious elites”, as it were, the new priestly class of modern society from whom statesmen, legislators and policymakers derive their legitimacy. But these “high-priests” of modernity are also common citizens of their respective polity and as such they have a share in the burden of collective responsibility.

PROGRAMME

- 10.00 Welcome and Introduction: **SILKE SCHICKTANZ** AND **MICHAEL DUSCHE**
- 10.30 – 11.30 **Panel 1: *Transnational guidelines – national contexts: political, legal, and democratic legitimization of expert advice in health care and science policies***
- CHAIR: **DR. SUSAN VISVANATHAN**, PROFESSOR, CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIAL SYSTEMS, JNU, NEW DELHI.
- “RECENT DEVELOPMENTS OF LEGAL AND ETHICAL GUIDELINES FOR MEDICAL PRACTISE AND SCIENCE IN INDIA.” **DR. R. R. KISHORE**, MA, LLB; ADVOCATE, SUPREME COURT OF INDIA; PRESIDENT, INDIAN SOCIETY OF HEALTH LAW AND ETHICS.
 - “CHANGING SOCIAL CONTRACT BETWEEN SCIENCE AND SOCIETY. EXPLORING THE CASE OF BIOTECHNOLOGY IN INDIA.” **RENNY THOMAS**, RESEARCH SCHOLAR, CENTRE FOR STUDIES IN SCIENCE POLICY, JNU, NEW DELHI.
- 11.30 – 12.00 **Tea and Coffee break**
- 12.00 – 13.30 **Panel 2: *Personal Responsibilities – Social Dilemmas: Dealing with Efficiency, Dilemmas and Dissent in Expert Statements***
- CHAIR: **DR. NANDULA RAGHURAM**, READER, SCHOOL OF BIOTECHNOLOGY, GURU GOBIND SINGH INRAPRASTHA UNIVERSITY DELHI.
- “EXPERTISE AND AUTHORITY. HOW SHOULD GATEKEEPERS HANDLE EVIDENCE AND DISSENT?” **DR. RAJESWARI S. RAINA**, SCIENTIST, NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & DEVELOPMENT STUDIES (NISTADS), NEW DELHI.
 - “THE HIATUS BETWEEN PRACTISE AND ETHICAL GUIDELINES – THE CASE OF CAESAREAN SECTION IN INDIA.” **DR. TULSI PATEL**, PROFESSOR, CENTRE OF ADVANCED STUDY, DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY, DELHI SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS.
- 13.30 – 15.00 **Lunch break**
- 15.00 – 17.00 **Panel 3: *Complementing or Contrasting Expert Positions: The Voice of Patients, Laypeople and Media.***
- CHAIR: **SILKE SCHICKTANZ**
- “ENGAGING WITH HEALTH AND RELATED POLICIES: A CIVIL SOCIETY EXPERIENCE.” **PREETI NAYAK**, SAMA RESOURCE GROUP FOR WOMEN AND HEALTH, DELHI.
 - FINAL DISCUSSION
- ALSO PRESENT: **DR. MOHAN RAO**, PROFESSOR, CENTRE FOR SOCIAL MEDICINE AND COMMUNITY HEALTH, JNU; **DR. BIRGITTE BRUUN NIELSEN**, MD, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF OBSTETRICS AND GYNAECOLOGY, AARHUS UNIVERSTY HOSPITAL, DENMARK.