



## Editorial

### Experts and Expertise in the Public and Political Sphere

Jitka Wirthová, Tomáš Dvořák

*The processual approach raises the long-vexed question of “value-free inquiry” in a particularly pressing manner. Processual ontology makes it evident that all the “empirical realities” of social life are in fact congealed values of one sort or another. (Abbott 2016:229)*

#### Social Imaginaries of Expert Advice on Public Issues

Historically, the idea of the correct relationship between expertise and politics has drawn on the modern ideal of rational public decision in increasingly complex societies (Dewey 2016 [orig. 1927]). Through this, the application of expertise as a science-based and truth-seeking activity is pulled into the realm of activity based on deciding good and evil for a given community; rationality is pulled into the realm of normativity. Through this lens, it is possible to observe conflicts in a particular way, whether as those endangering the truth due to “political” interference in research or endangering the public’s free and democratic decision due to expertocracy that closes any discussion. Both of these critiques are grounded in the shared assumption of naturally distinct fields of activity (science and politics) and, moreover, in the unproblematic treatment of normative claims of truth and the common good. However, at least for two decades, there have been sociological observations that point to the rather interconnected and relational nature of both spheres, objecting to their natural borders and statics (Abbott 2016; Sheller 2004; Turner 2015). Nevertheless, these relational and processual approaches have never become mainstream in understanding the relationship between expertise and politics.

From the modern era onward, science has been seen as a more or less secure solution to societal problems. We can see three peaks of this imaginary: the first in the interwar period of technocratic solutions to decadent modernity, represented by successful industrialists (Jordan 1994), the second in the 70<sup>th</sup> scientific-technological revolution, which was aimed at the scientification of human lives (Sommer, Spurný, and Mrňka 2019), and the third, after 2010 (Ansell and Geyer 2017), with calls for evidence-based public decisions. Interestingly, this imaginary has survived all the postmodern attacks of the 1980s and 1990s.

But it must be remembered at the same time that the debate about expertise is understood differently in the two contexts of the “West” and the post-socialist countries of the Central and Eastern European region (CEE hereafter). In the latter region, sociological and historical knowledge about the specific relationship between expertise and the public sphere has been immersed in the normative debate about catching up with the West (Dvořák and Wirthová 2024), and circumvented older and more critical debate about the utopian character of rational expert politics (Oakeshott 1962).

Preferences for expertise advising politics flourished mainly in post-socialist countries of the CEE, where it approached from two sides, from the very citizens exhausted from ineffective government (Bertsou and Pastorella 2017) and from western reformers helping post-communist countries by means of the application of expert knowledge and neoliberal solutions (Kopeček et al. 2019). Thus, the idea of expert solutions to public problems became part of the debate about the transformation from a dismal post-communist state to a better democracy. There still persist some theoretical obstacles that presuppose expert knowledge to have, on the one hand, fixed, universal, and normative qualities, and, on the other hand, the public sphere to have a fixed, universal, and normative content and location. Both the normativity of the good public sphere and the natural difference between expertise and public interest, nevertheless, have governed most research and public policy up to today. However, this rather closes the possibility of taking such normativity and the difference between expertise and public interest as sociological or historical questions.

In this special issue, we take the assumed division between expertise and the public sphere as a matter to be explored by sociological or historical analyses – and we take inspiration from the recent spatial turn in social sciences, which has dynamised the relation between knowledge and space-time (Allen 2016; Massey 2005; Sheller and Urry 2003). For this special issue, therefore, we also invited authors to look at the problem of expertise related to the public sphere and public issues in processual, historical, relational, and topological ways. Our aim was to shed light on the social processes at work in the relationship between expertise and the public sphere and normativity with respect to the activities of experts recognising and implementing the common good. The particular focus is on these phenomena in mutual relationships in the CEE region and across a rather broad historical span.

In this introductory paper, we begin with a critical confrontation of the idea of separated realms, arguing that it is misleading to focus on conflicts between expertise and politics as a zero-sum game in which the winner takes all and always enslaves the loser for its own purposes. On this basis, we develop the main argument that the history of expert solutions to public issues is much longer and constitutes a common ground for the legitimation of both communist and (neo)liberal worldviews by technocratic or expertocratic arguments. The final section is devoted to an overview of papers to invite readers to learn how the authors of each paper approach the above issues.

## **Expertise and the Public are not Separated Realms**

Low trust in political institutions, ineffective economic management, falling standards in education, and global warming and climate change are all deemed to be pressing public

issues. That is, they are not merely personal issues but common challenges that can only be faced by people together; these are necessarily political. Also, what is required besides collective action is the intervention of experts, who would assist by providing the truth (facts) about the respective problems.

From one point of view, however, the case is not of whether an expert will enter the public issue or not, since expertise is already involved. The expertise has already entered these public issues into the public arena, since, without the expertise, such public issues would not exist. First, the public issues mentioned above are not untouched by experts, because such issues have already been made public through the process of the relational mingling of expertise and politics. For example, low trust in public institutions, so much discussed in post-communist countries, is a public issue made apparent through longitudinal surveys; falling standards in education are statements through the statistical work carried out by hired analysts at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD); global warming is a phenomenon defined and described by climate scientists over several decades. From the other point of view, the opposite is true: the political and the normative are involved in expertise before it can describe the true state of affairs. Expertise in post-socialist regions, originating from transnational political or economic organisations such as the European Union, the World Bank, or the OECD and designed to help nation-states transform from communism to democracy, has inscribed in itself political programmes, which, as more critical research has shown, were not innocently presenting, but rather reproducing political neoliberal ideals (Gorur 2015).

Our key argument is that the assumption of two radically opposing realms should be problematized and rather the subject of research itself. Combining both of these vectors (expertise→politics and politics→expertise) means acknowledging the original relationality and not looking for its “origin” – this would only reinforce the idea of naturally separated realms. Rather, we invited the authors of the present papers to think about this issue theoretically and to explain such relationality either sociologically or historically. To reflect the citation in the introduction, we can say with Andrew Abbott that the facts of expertise are congealed values (Abbott 2007, 2016), and simultaneously, we add that the values within a public issue are congealed facts. The political is already involved in the scientific and vice versa, and societal problems and the expertise to solve them are not separated realms of social life. In other words, a kind of expertise is already involved in the very shape of the problem as we are used to knowing it. In many current public issues it is almost pointless to search for the originator, not only because we cannot see that far back in history, but also above all because both political and scientific activities have always been connected. Contemporary sociology itself shows that these activities cannot be ontologically (at the level of social relations) separated; only for the purposes of heuristics, can they be separated analytically.

To prevent misunderstanding, we treat these public issues as real public issues, as many people have invested a great deal of energy in defining and solving them. However, the aim of this introductory paper and the collection of papers that follows is to understand predominantly the relationship between public and political, not only the particular public issue. The aim is not to decide political disputes but to point to the relationship between public issues and expertise through interdisciplinary scholarship.

## The Long History of “Expert” Governance – Communist Legacies and the Present

This special issue aims to analyse the processual and historical character of normativity and the reality of expert/ technocratic claims. We want to explore both historical and contemporary technocratic aspects and the functioning of the political and public spheres.

One significant inspiration comes from the historical debate on the nature of technocratic governance under socialism. When the social sciences think about the legacy of communist regimes in the region of Central and Eastern Europe, expert governance is seen as something contradicting the communist era and its ideological character of politics. However, several particularly historical reflections on the continuity between expert governance under communism and present technocratic tendencies have emerged in recent years (Kopeček 2016; Sommer et al. 2019). Kopeček et al. (2019) introduced a thesis on the continuity between late communist governance legitimised technocratically and the neoliberal political and social transformation after 1989, which objected to the mainstream understanding of neoliberalism as imported to CEE from the West. The thesis is that although there was an overall social and economic transformation of Eastern European societies, the previously present emphasis on expert governance permeated the newly democratizing societies and combined with a strong emphasis on neoliberalism. Rather than an inevitable collapse of the communist regime and a rapid transformation to neoliberalism, the author argues that the change of political system was, in fact, much more gradual and involved continuities in expertocratic imaginaries within industrial and economic organisations. In this special issue, mainly the papers by Sommer and Štefek address these economic cases.

This latter thesis finds support in the analyses by Sonia Hirt, who added another important thread of continuity to this development from communism to neoliberal capitalism, which is the tendency of people under a totalitarian regime to resort to private spheres, resulting in a culture of individualism likely congruent to neoliberal individualism. In particular, her concept of privatism (Hirt 2012), including the link between individualism and technocracy, seems to persist in current public spheres in CEE. Especially in post-socialist countries, where the public sphere was driven by ideology, the more real sphere seemed to be the hidden, publicly invisible, private sphere. This situation influenced a great deal of social scientific reflection on the “unreal public façade” (Rupnik 1984) and the “real underground” (Havel 2018). Therefore, formal public positions are not granted much legitimacy, and, therefore, there is a lack of legitimised public positions to act in the name of collectivity; actors must put much more energy into achieving affirmation and support from the general populace. In our previous study (Dvořák and Wirthová 2024), we enhanced the understanding of the transformation from communism to democracy by analysing the different boundaries between politics and the public sphere in a CEE country and a Western one. Although the communist regime’s legacy is a strong mistrust of politics, it does not mean that this mistrust overlaps with public issues and undermines democracy as an ideal. This is addressed particularly by Dvořák in this issue.

However, this general tendency to prefer expertocracy has not only been scrutinised by historical approaches, but has also been questioned by critical social sciences, which are inherently sensitive to normative pre-conceptions of optimism about experts entering

the public sphere. Either concealing mere political opinion in empirical “objective” research (Abbott 2001) or rendering normative advice quickly from empirical data (Gorur 2015; Ruppert 2012), the CEE region was in many historical circumstances subjected to both of these normativities (Silova 2002). In this respect, current evidence-based policies as a universal panacea for “mistaken” developments in public services and/or the “ill” public/political sphere may be an example. Objection to such objectivity and consequential normativity is nothing new in social science, but current shifts in the character of both the public sphere and expertise beg even more nuanced conceptual and ontological approaches.

In summary, long-term changes carry with them many continuities that have consequences for difficult-to-observe changes at the boundaries between the political, public and expert spheres. Therefore, the question of who is (or was) in the position of expert and on what basis becomes a sociological one. This pertains to the struggle between managers and politicians during the normalisation era, as well as to the post-transformation period, with respect to both managerial and educational expertise. There may be expertise to solve a problem, but there is also expertise to raise awareness of the respective issue. Who is in a position to assume this expertise becomes an important question as the nature of expertise becomes its own public issue, especially in the CEE region. Where and how the expertise is produced and to what extent the context is politically dependent are crucial.

## Overview of Contributions

This special issue consists of five papers; one paper covers broadly the topic of attitudes to technocracy in CEE regions, while the two remaining topics – the salient political tokens of industry and education in public debate in Czechia and Slovakia after transformation – are each covered by two papers. In both of these latter areas, expertise was challenged and moved to various places and into the hands of various actors. Both can be partly seen as successive; debate about the transformation of industry took place during normalisation and the 1990s, and the debate about educational reform took place after the 2000s. Hence, the ordering of the individual articles in this issue is chronological. We start with an overview study, then we discuss normalisation and transformation cases, and end with the most recent ones. The papers collected in this special issue function as probes into fascinating topics that govern our contemporality. Hopefully, they invite discussion and inspire further inquiry.

The first paper, “Why Are We Still Technocrats? On the Sources of Technocratic Attitudes in Post-Communist Region of CEE” by **Tomáš Dvořák** is a historical overview of technocratic attitudes. It opens the discussion with the question of why, in the post-socialist countries of CEE – in contrast to Western countries and for such a long time and so intensively – the values of technocratic government at the expense of politics prevail. The results of his analysis, based on survey data, show that the popular preference for technocratic governance, common across CEE countries, is primarily associated with disaffection with the transformation of political institutions. At the same time, it is not a manifestation of anti-democratic attitudes. Rather, technocracy is perceived as an instrument of democratic politics – as an antidote to democratic malfunctioning.

This is followed by a study of the managerial governance of industrial organisations, immersed in the conflict between expert and political managers that developed in a communist regime, during the so-called “normalisation” after the collapse of the Prague Spring in 1968. **Martin Štefek** conducted his research at a ceramic plant in Czechia for his paper “Expertise and Conflicts in State Business Management during the Era of ‘Normalisation’ in Czechoslovakia: Pluralism or Corporatism?” Štefek shows how socialist industrial managers were placed in multiple centres of power, which were influencing expertise and management – specifically, the ministries, societal organisations, and both local and central organs of the Communist Party – and how they navigated the difficult relationship between expertise and politics. For example, the fact that the production plan was set by the government, along with many actors on the margins, e.g., professional Party apparatchiks, demonstrates the various modes of expertise-politics relations. The study by Štefek brings new insights into the historical origins of the social conflict that pertains today as a result of the transition from communism to democracy immediately after the revolution.

This transition is an important part of the following studies, although they differ in their empirical cases. The historical situation after the collapse of communism in CEE countries was consequential for both the development of a different form of public sphere (Bernhard 2020), and the adoration of a specific kind of expertise (Porter 1995). The newly-developing relationship between them had serious consequences, e.g., invisibilising critical public debate and moving it to the margins (Wirthová), creating a dependence on international statistical data in the face of a lack of sufficient data at the local level (Kaščák), or neutralising the communist past of many managers by legitimisation through expert management of the economy (Sommer). In all these cases, it can be said that the taken-for-granted boundaries between the public sphere and expertise in mainstream research are challenged.

Following the case of multi-faceted, expertise-politics relations in industrial organisation during normalisation, is another study of industry, but this time during the collapse of the communist regime, the demise of central planning, and the transformation to capitalism. The paper “Industrial Management and the Crisis of Managerial Expertise in Economic Transformation: A Case Study of the Czech Footwear Industry” by **Vítězslav Sommer** shows that the activities of managers in the era of economic transformation, their long-term plans, and their momentary decisions were the result of a complex and ambivalent interaction of continuities and discontinuities in managerial expertise and practice. The collapse of the communist regime and concomitant arrival of liberal cultural and economic order did not affect the existing technocratic order in companies, which had already been established by the politics of expertise in late socialist industry and which paradoxically had arisen because of a crisis in managerial expertise based on discredited central planning.

Similarly to industry, which was a political token during the transformation period, education can be understood as a new political token today. Education is seen as a major solution to many societal problems (Depaepe and Smeyers 2008), which also places a burden on education, its organisations and actors. However, the declared importance of education does not always bring economic, social or even expert autonomy (Biesta 2019). Therefore, this special issue concludes with two educational cases in the context of the contestations between politics and expertise.

In his paper “Thank God for the OECD – Modalities of Expertise in Current Education Policy in Slovakia”, **Ondrej Kaščák** shows how expertise that has moulded politically-proposed systemic and curricular education reform in Slovakia has acquired specific features. The politically- and economically-driven call for educational reform from the European Union Recovery Programme after COVID, called NextGenerationEu (2021), has been recontextualised in Slovakia and this has set specific conditions for the kind of expertise required. Navigation is mingled in a truly messy situation marked by many contradictory imaginaries: numerocracy and all-pervasive sociometrics, which appeared in Western countries in the 1980s and which was transferred to the CEE post socialist region; older communist quantifications and planning; rising mistrust in organised science after Covid; removal of the older social reports from expertise; and a dependence on statistical international data from the OECD and the EU. This, Kaščák contrasts with the Nordic region, where expertise is moulded from national expertise and expertise based on secondary interpretations of data from international comparisons.

Our special issue concludes with the question **Jitka Wirthová** poses in her paper “The Hollowing-out of the Public Sphere or its Re-spatialisation? A Topological Probe in the Case of Expert Advice to the Education System”, in which education is again a political token. It relates to the key focus of this issue – the assumed natural borders and contents of the public sphere and the supposed natural scientific foundation of expertise. By means of an empirical study of the auditing endeavours of an educational NGO, she points to a current significant change. Expertise is not about knowledge and scientific method, but explicitly about political influence. Relatedly, a public issue, a degrading school system in her case, is crafted on the basis of statistical data and other types of knowledge that follow the much-criticised audit culture. In such a situation, a critical public can only appear on the margins of public debate, that is, where the roles of experts and those to be reformed are negotiated. However, she also emphasises the historical process of this development, namely the precarious position of civic and non-government organisations in-between the closed and silent private sphere and state bureaucracy after 1989.

## References

- Abbott, Andrew. 2001. *Time Matters: On Theory and Method*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Abbott, Andrew. 2007. “For Humanist Sociology.” Pp. 195–209 in *Public Sociology: Fifteen Eminent Sociologists Debate Politics and the Profession in the Twenty-first Century*, edited by D. Clawson, R. Zussman, J. Misra, N. Gerstel, R. Stokes, D. L. Anderton, and M. Burawoy. University of California Press.
- Abbott, Andrew. 2016. *Processual Sociology*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Allen, John. 2016. *Topologies of Power*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Ansell, Christopher and Robert Geyer. 2017. “‘Pragmatic Complexity’ a New Foundation for Moving beyond ‘Evidence-Based Policy Making’?” *Policy Studies* 38(2): 149–167. doi:10.1080/01442872.2016.1219033
- Bernhard, Michael. 2020. “What Do We Know about Civil Society and Regime Change Thirty Years after 1989?” *East European Politics* 36(3): 341–362. doi:10.1080/21599165.2020.1787160

- Bertsou, Eri and Giulia Pastorella. 2017. "Technocratic Attitudes: A Citizens' Perspective of Expert Decision-Making." *West European Politics* 40(2): 430–458. doi:10.1080/01402382.2016.1242046
- Biesta, Gert. 2019. "What Kind of Society Does the School Need? Redefining the Democratic Work of Education in Impatient Times." *Studies in Philosophy and Education* (First Online: 07 August 2019). doi:10.1007/s11217-019-09675-y
- Depaepe, Marc and Paul Smeyers. 2008. "Educationalization as an Ongoing Modernization Process." *Educational Theory* 58(4): 379–389. doi:10.1111/j.1741-5446.2008.00295.x
- Dewey, John. 2016. *The Public and Its Problems*. Athens (OH): Ohio University Press.
- Dvořák, Tomáš and Jitka Wirthová. 2024. "Political and Public Engagement as Topological Boundary-Making: A Critique of 'Deficit' Approaches in Post-Communist CEE." *Space and Polity* 28(1). doi:10.1080/13562576.2023.2291647
- Gorur, Radhika. 2015. "Producing Calculable Worlds: Education at a Glance." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 36(4): 578–595. doi:10.1080/01596306.2015.974942
- Havel, Václav. 2018. "The Power of the Powerless." *East European Politics and Societies* 32(2): 353–408. doi:10.1177/0888325418766625
- Jordan, John M. 1994. *Machine-Age Ideology: Social Engineering and American Liberalism 1911-1948*. Chapel Hill.
- Kopeček, Michal. 2016. *Architekti dlouhé změny: Expertní kořeny postsocialismu v Československu [Architects of the Long Change. Expert Roots of Postsocialism in Czechoslovakia]*. Praha: Argo; FF UK; ÚSD AV ČR.
- Kopeček, Michal, Adéla Gjuričová, Petr Roubal, Matěj Spurný, and Tomáš Vilímek. 2019. *Architects of Long Change: The Expert Roots of Postsocialism in Czechoslovakia*. Prague: Argo.
- Massey, Doreen. 2005. *For Space*. London: SAGE.
- Porter, Theodore M. 1995. *Trust in Numbers*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ruppert, Evelyn. 2012. "The Governmental Topologies of Database Devices." *Theory, Culture & Society* 29(5): 116–136. doi:10.1177/0263276412439428
- Sheller, Mimi. 2004. "Mobile Publics: Beyond the Network Perspective." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 22(1): 39–52. doi:10.1068/d324t
- Sheller, Mimi and John Urry. 2003. "Mobile Transformations of 'Public' and 'Private' Life." *Theory, Culture & Society* 20(3): 107–125. doi:10.1177/02632764030203007
- Silova, Iveta. 2002. "The Manipulated Consensus: Globalisation, Local Agency, and Cultural Legacies in Post-Soviet Education Reform." *European Educational Research Journal* 1(2): 308–330.
- Sommer, Vítězslav, Matěj Spurný, and Jaromír Mrňka. 2019. *Řídit Socialismus jako Firmu. Technokratické Vládnutí v Československu 1956-1989 [Run Socialism like a Business. Technocratic Governance in Czechoslovakia 1956–1989]*. Praha: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR.
- Turner, Stephen P. 2015. *The Politics of Expertise*. New York: Routledge.