

Review Feature - The Experts are Dead, Long Live the Experts!

Written by Antonio Calcara

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ANTONIO CALCARA, OCT 7 2017

The Ideas Industry: How Pessimists, Partisans, and Plutocrats are Transforming the Marketplace of Ideas
By Daniel Drezner
New York: Oxford University Press, 2017

The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters
By Tom Nicols
New York: Oxford University Press, 2017

Brexit and the election of Donald Trump in the US are the two events that have characterized the last year's political debate. On both occasions, voters ignored the point of view of an overwhelming majority of journalists, experts, academics and public figures. Moreover, during both events, a large strand of political actors demonstrated a proud hostility to the analysis of the academic, economic and political elites of their countries. Michael Gove, one of the exponents of the Brexit camp, has explicitly stated that "I think that people in this country have had enough of experts". Likewise, Trump emphasized that "the experts are terrible". It is no coincidence, therefore, that in 2017 two books have been published – written by US academics – that explicitly start from the same research question, namely: Are we seeing a decline in the role of experts? How to analyze the relationship between experts and democracy in a political landscape marked by a growing mistrust in established authorities?

The Death of Expertise, written by Tom Nichols, is a book that extends his arguments of an earlier widely-read article in *The Federalist*. The book starts from the premise that the current political and social landscape is characterized not only by a substantial indifference to established knowledge but also by the emergence of a positive hostility to such knowledge. Although the author admits that it is not new to contest established knowledge, in the present day "the public space is increasingly dominated by a loose assortment of poorly informed people, many of whom are autodidacts, who are disdainful of formal education and dismissive of experience" (p.14). In order to analyse this phenomenon, Nichols takes into account cognitive factors (in particular the so-called "confirmation bias" effect, according to which there is a natural tendency to only accept evidence that confirms what we already believe), the relationship between the commodification of the university experience and critical thinking, the proliferation of low-quality information available on the Internet, and how the new media has worsened the quality of public debate.

The book is very enjoyable to read with a stimulating discussion of the role of experts in US democracy. Despite the author's clear description of the current landscape in which experts interact with a mass of people who despise their knowledge, this book shows two fundamental weaknesses. First, Nichols offers little in terms of hard data to prove its arguments. The pessimistic tone and the author's cutting comments (for instance "We are proud of not knowing things" [p.xxii] and "Academics have abandoned their duty to engage with the public" [p.5]) are not strengthened by an accurate, substantial and verifiable empirical analysis. If most professionals and experts feel, intuitively, that their work is no longer appreciated as in the past, Nichols should empirically demonstrate if and how it is no longer the case. Second, and most importantly, Nichols' book struggles to identify the causes of the so-called "death of expertise". Although he recognizes that anti-intellectualism is not a new phenomenon (chapter 1), he does not explain clearly why anti-intellectualism has changed today and why it is so widespread across politics and society.

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The Ideas Industry, written by Dan Drezner, professor of Political Science at Fletcher School, can be used as a useful counterbalance to some of the intuitive arguments developed by Nichols. His work analyses the role of experts in a narrow field, namely the so-called “marketplace of foreign policy ideas”. It consists of “the array of intellectual outputs and opinions on foreign affairs and the extent to which policymakers and publics embrace those ideas” (p.8). The intellectuals and experts have traditionally largely shaped the political debate on the US foreign policy. Trump’s success, and the fact that he deliberately avoided contacts with the academic elite in the US is unprecedented. Henry Kissinger, perhaps the symbol of the interpenetration between academia and US foreign policy, affirmed that “the Trump phenomenon is in large part a reaction of Middle America to attacks on its values by intellectual and academic committees” (p.7). Drezner’s aim is to analyse the role of experts in the current U.S. public debate and how this role has changed in recent decades. This book is useful to address the two major weaknesses that I highlighted in the Nichols’ analysis.

First, Drezner shows us, with an impressive amount of empirical material (see chapter 2), how talking about the “death of expertise” is definitely out of place. In contrast, the proliferation of new media and internet sources has lowered the entry threshold for new thinkers and innovative ideas. Being influential today is much easier than it was in the past. The main shift is that the new intellectual market (what Drezner calls “The Ideas Industry”) has created winners and losers. The “winners” (and therefore the experts who have a greater impact in the public debate) are the so-called “thought leaders”, which differ from the traditional public intellectuals, for their strong normative consensus and for “their own singular lens to explain the world, and then proselytize that worldview to anyone within earshot [...] Thought leaders know one big thing and believe that their important ideas will change the world” (p.9). Drezner describes the current leading thought leaders in the current US intellectual landscape. Within this landscape economists (despite their repeated wrong predictions) are more influential than political scientists (chapter 3) and private groups like management consultancies and political risk firms are much more influential than universities and think tanks (chapters 4, 5, 6).

Second, Drenzer makes an effort to understand what the causes of this phenomenon are. He identifies three of them: 1) the erosion of trust in established authorities; 2) a growth in political polarization; 3) an increase in economic inequality. However, while the first two issues are discussed, though not explicitly, in Nichols’ book, the third element is what most impacts on the changing role of experts in contemporary Western democracies. In fact, the rise of economic inequality is a precondition for the erosion of trust in established authorities and of the greater political polarisation of public debate. The rise of economic inequality has ensured that the marketplace of ideas is controlled nowadays by a small minority of plutocrats who fund innovative research and new media. Thought leaders, with their strong convictions and blind allegiance to their ideas, are better off than public intellectuals – who are more inclined to complex analysis and are reluctant to predict – in interacting with the plutocrats and policy-makers. For example, economists, with their emphasis on economic dynamism and technological innovation, are more “appealing” than political scientists, who tend to apply a structural analysis to politics (chapter 3).

What to do then? How can public intellectuals react? The two books (written by two true public intellectuals) sow more doubts than answers. Nichols’ tone is pessimistic (even catastrophic). He stated that “a possible resolution will lie in a disaster as yet unforeseen. It may be a war or an economic collapse” (p.236). Drezner’s proposal, however, is more optimistic, and points to a more incisive role of universities and think tanks.

Both books are useful in understanding how the role of experts has changed in the current American political and social landscape. Drezner’s book reflects in more depth on the causes of changing the role of experts. However, what is missing, in both books, is a deep and radical analysis of the causes of the changing role of experts in public debate. While it is true that economic inequality impacts on this phenomenon, it is not clear how and this needs further elaboration. As the geography of the Brexit vote and the election of Trump tells us, there is a profound division between the centre and the periphery of each country. Big cities, perfectly integrated into the global economic and industrial circuit, still believe in the promises of their establishments. The periphery, in contrast, does not see any advantage to voting the way experts tell them.

Although the two books are written by American academics for an American audience, both analyses should widen their outlook to the European continent. The economic downturn, the migration crisis and the inability of the EU to

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cope with these emergencies, as well as the rise of “anti-establishment” political formations is fertile ground for understanding how the role of experts has changed in the most influential European countries and how this process differs (if there are differences) from that of the US. From an academic point of view, combining the analysis of widespread “anti-intellectualism” in the current political debate with recent literature on populist phenomena in Europe would increase our understanding of the changing role of experts in our democracies. This effort is necessary and would benefit our understanding of the complex relations between expertise, economic inequality and populism.

About the author:

Antonio Calcara is a post-doctoral researcher at LUISS University in Rome. He won the Egmont and the European Security and Defence College “Global Strategy Ph.D. Prize” in 2019 and is the author of *European Defence Decision-Making: Dilemmas of Collaborative Arms Procurement*.