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Discussion

What Expertise Does Politics Need in Times of Crisis? Notes on the Current Situation in Austria

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Abstract
In the Coronavirus crisis, a slogan became prominent that we know from the climate debate: Follow the science! What is wrong with this slogan and how policy advice should be organized in the crisis is discussed in this text. It is argued that the demands on expertise depend on the type of crisis: While expertocracy is legitimate in acute crisis situations, strong interdisciplinarity is needed in chronic crises. The associated fear of polyphony and disunity in science is wrong. Only expert dissent – albeit institutionally coordinated and well justified – makes it clear what is at stake and what room for maneuver there is for policymakers to make decisions.

Keywords
Policy advice, expertise, crisis, moralization, COVID-19

Welche Expertise braucht die Politik in Krisenzeiten? Bemerkungen zur gegenwärtigen Lage in Österreich

Zusammenfassung
In der Coronakrise sind zuletzt wieder Forderungen laut geworden, dass die Politik endlich der Wissenschaft folgen solle. Was an dieser Parole falsch ist und wie Politikberatung in der Krise organisiert sein sollte, diskutiert dieser Text. Es wird argumentiert, dass die Anforderungen an Expertise vom Typus der Krise abhängen: Während in akuten Krisensituationen die Expertokratie legitim ist, bedarf es in chronischen Krisen starker Interdisziplinarität. Die damit verbundene Angst vor der Vielstimmigkeit und Uneinigkeit der Wissenschaft ist falsch. Nur ein – institutionell koordinierter und gut begründeter – Expertendissens macht deutlich, was im Einzelfall auf dem Spiel steht und welchen Entscheidungsspielraum die Politik hat.

Schlüsselwörter
Politikberatung, Expertise, Krise, Moralisierung, COVID-19

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When the new Corona variant Omikron caused the infection figures in Austria to rise steeply at the beginning of 2022, a newly created expert commission met in the run-up to the “Bund-Länder-Gipfel”. This diverse group includes experts from different fields of scientific research such as molecular biology, virology and simulation research, as well as stakeholders including representatives of the social partners and social insurance, and the heads of the chambers of physicians and pharmacists (Anders 2021). The main objectives of this 25-member advisory body, the heart of the “Gesamtstaatliche COVID-Krisenkoordination” (GECKO), are to provide forward-looking scientific analysis of the pandemic situation and to develop policy options.

With the establishment of this new body at the Federal Chancellery (Bundeskanzleramt, BKA), it became clear that the organization of policy advice had given top priority by the government. It is true that a number of COVID-relevant advisory bodies already existed, such as the expert committees at the Supreme Sanitary Council (Oberster Sanitätsrat) or the advisory board within the framework of the State Crisis and Disaster Management (Staatliches Krisen- und Katastrophenschutzmanagement, SKKM) at the Ministry of the Interior (Bundesministerium für Inneres, BMI). However, apparently the fragmented and confusing advisory system in Austria generated the need to establish a new body at the interface of science and politics. Such an attempt had already been made – as a bottom-up initiative from within the scientific community – at the beginning of the coronavirus crisis, under the title “Future Operations Board” (König 2020). But this fluctuating body, supported by a large number of scientists, has not found an institutional form even two years after its foundation (which says nothing about its productivity).

Even from this brief sketch, it is clear that in the course of the pandemic, the right relationship between advisory science and deliberative politics is also being wrestled with. In what way should politics engage with science – and what can and should science do to advise politics in times of crisis? These are questions that have been debated in political science for several decades (e.g., Biegelbauer 2013; Brown et al. 2005). Causes for an intensified debate were provided by the establishment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Beck 2012), the establishment of national ethics councils at the turn of the millennium (Bogner 2011), or the role of experts in the financial crisis (Hirschi 2021). In the coronavirus crisis, these questions arise anew. After all, here – similar to the climate crisis – there is a dispute about how exactly and how far politics may – or must – follow science.

1. Follow the science? On the relationship between crisis and expertise

Even as the third COVID-19 wave threatened in April 2021, many called for politics to finally follow science consistently. At the time, “Spiegel” columnist Margarete Stokowski (2021) wrote in emphatic staccato: “Listen. To. The. Science.” Sounds reasonable and sympathetic at first: “Follow the science” – who else should we follow?

But it is not quite that simple. For such slogans, which have been made popular above all by climate activists, assume that there are scientifically correct, i.e. quasi value- and ideology-free answers to typical political controversial questions (such as: “Do we need tougher measures?”). However, as the sociologist Max Weber (1995) pointed out, no matter how exact the scientific figures, data and forecasts, they do not release us from the obligation to make decisions. Scientific fact does not imply a political program of action.

Let’s take the example of climate change: All the modeling, simulations and predictions about global warming and related catastrophes, no matter how precise, do not yet anticipate a political decision. Or rather, scientific climate expertise can only replace political decision-making if there is a broad consensus in society that we want to prevent the climate emergency painted by science and are therefore prepared to change our lifestyle and constrain ourselves. In short, only in the case of an acute perception of crisis does something like a political constraint arise from scientific expertise.

It is exactly the same in the case of the pandemic: At the beginning, in early 2020, the protection of life and health was given top priority – without compromise and without a vote. The alarming images from Lombardy had created a moment of shock that contributed to a spontaneous social consensus. The (real or symbolic) consternation was high; solidarity (with the elderly and the sick, with neighbors in need of help, with nursing staff) was writ large. The expectation on politics was to act quickly and introduce effective measures.

The US political scientist Roger Pielke (2007) has spoken of “tornado politics” in this context. This means that there is no time for democratic deliberation when the hurricane comes. In acute crises, we want to know from the experts what we should do without debating it at length. In acute crisis situations, it can be concluded, expertocracy is legitimate.

However, this expertocracy can only function if the experts speak with one voice, i.e. if *one* scientific discipline (or perspective) clearly has the upper hand and only a narrow section of available expertise is heard in politics. This is reflected in the words of Bavarian Premier Markus Söder, who stated at the beginning of the crisis: “The Bavarian state government has coordinated its actions with doctors, virologists and

experts. The primacy of medicine applies." (Bayerische Staatsregierung 2020)

What was initially an acute crisis has become a persistent (or chronic) crisis as of early summer 2020. Even multiple nationwide lockdowns and a cascade of local measures, not even the free offer of effective vaccines, have so far failed to overcome the crisis. The coronavirus is still present, shaping national health policy as much as work life or our vacation plans.

In chronic crises, fear, consternation and solidarity rapidly decline. While the population initially celebrated its solidarity on apartment balconies, this soon ebbed noticeably and was no longer an effective resource even in 2021, the year of the great vaccination (and the arduous vaccination campaigns). In other words, crisis-related risks are becoming less important or increasingly understood as individual risks. What keeps the crisis in the public consciousness is not so much its current threat potential as the public dispute about the adequate measures or the right interpretation of the crisis.

Acute crises transform the pluralistic society into a community united by danger. Chronic crises, on the other hand, are characterized by dissent: The crisis – after the end of the great unity – is evaluated point of view-specifically and thus acquires many faces. Dissent takes place at the normative level (value pluralism), at the political level (the will to oppose awakens), in the public arena (protests) and at the scientific level. With regard to the latter aspect, this means that as soon as it becomes clear that COVID-19 is a multi-layered problem with economic, legal, psychosocial and political facets, other voices from science must be heard – at least in principle – beyond medicine, virology and the model calculations of physics.

The attempt to "keep politics out of it" in such a situation and to pretend that there is only *one* rationally justified option for action is therefore not credible. The famous slogan "follow the science" therefore falls short if it is taken to mean that politics should confine itself to carrying out the instructions of science. For one thing, this misses the essence of politics; after all, politics is characterized by the constructive handling of plurality, which requires the inclusion of many voices (far beyond science) in order to find workable compromises. People also mistakenly assume that science speaks with one voice. In fact, however, there have been and continue to be conflicting policy recommendations from the scientific community. This is not due to the partisan political preferences of the experts, but rather to the different problem framing of the individual disciplines. After all, we have all experienced this: while experts from virology welcomed a next lockdown with a view to incidences, many economists warned against it. While medical researchers pointed out that even young people are contagious, educational researchers warned against further digital instruction and claimed to leave schools open.

What is the interim conclusion? Societal expectations of expertise vary with the type of crisis. To exaggerate: In acute crises, expertocracy is legitimate. In our context, expertocracy does not refer to a specific type of government (such as the government of civil servants under Brigitte Bierlein, which was in office from summer 2019 to early 2020), but rather to the fact that an elected government sees itself as the executive organ of scientific reason. The real problems with the organization of policy advice only begin where expertocracy is no longer legitimate, i.e., the crisis is in a chronic phase. Only then do we have to think about how to deal productively with the scientific interpretations and the polyphony of science.

2. The value of dissent – on the politicization of the crisis

What do democracy and science have in common? Not much, at least at first glance: In science, there is no vote on better knowledge, and democratic politics legitimizes itself through majority and constitutional conformity, not through truth. At second glance, however, a number of commonalities emerge between science and democracy, and a central commonality is their commitment to competition and contestation. For competition to become a productive stimulus in politics, however, it requires an ethos that Chantal Mouffe (2005) has called "agonism". That is, a vital democracy is based on the premise that representatives of ultimately irreconcilable political viewpoints may well see each other as adversaries, but not as enemies. The prerequisite for this is the admission or conviction that one is not in possession of the absolute truth oneself. Anti-dogmatism or self-critical rationalism was therefore already regarded by Hans Kelsen (2018) as a quasi-scientific prerequisite for democratic politics.

That there can be no real knowledge in science without challenge by critical dissenting voices was already John Stuart Mill's credo, and Karl Popper (1971, 26) still follows this line of argumentation when he declares that the game of science can basically have "no end" because it is about questioning any truth claims. We conclude from this: unquestioning agreement is not the heaven of science, but its end. Against this background, what seems to be in need of explanation is not dissent, but rather consensus, not only in research, but also and especially with regard to policy-relevant expertise.

Consensus in policy advice is quite unlikely, especially in times of crisis, when unexpected events take science by surprise and therefore many necessary data, consolidated findings and certain knowledge are

missing. A problem as complex as a pandemic also calls for interdisciplinarity and this multiplies the relevant voices. Advisory bodies – if they are to represent science in its broadness – assemble diverse, perhaps even incompatible, perspectives and paradigms, as well as, of course, divergent values and worldviews. Far-reaching consensus among experts may therefore be a desirable goal, especially in times of crisis, but there is always a danger here that this consensus will be seen as a result of strategic action because it is difficult to achieve at the methodological level. Science should therefore use consensual policy recommendations sparingly and cautiously.

The political value of expert dissent lies in the fact that it makes clear that ultimately it is the politicians who must decide. This aspect should not be underestimated. After all, a science that uses the polyphony of its perspectives and political recommendations for action to emphasize to the public that, at the end of the day, politics must make value decisions, does *more* for its society than if it pretends that political negotiation processes can be replaced by science. Of course: politics should be based on facts and scientific knowledge. But a policy that submits to the power of evidence or the recommendation of a majority of experts makes itself superfluous.

That is, expert disagreement provides an opportunity to politicize problems that may at first glance appear to be exclusively scientific issues (such as the question of which metrics to use to estimate the dangerousness of the pandemic).

Of course, politicization does not sound good, especially in Austria. In this country, politicization is usually understood as party politicization. In practice, this means that the crisis and its consequences are instrumentalized at will for the short-term goal of increasing power: Instead of reason, party tactical calculations prevail, instead of fact-oriented discourse, the strategic use of truth prevails, and instead of a democracy-promoting orientation toward understanding, the demonization of the political opponent prevails. The result is predictable: a publicly delivered mud-wrestling.

This is the warlike variant of politicization. At its center is the radical distinction between friend and enemy. Carl Schmitt (2015) has elevated this variant to the genuine logic of the political in order to remind Germany of its global political mission. Depoliticization, i.e., overcoming the merciless friend/enemy discrimination, is not a desirable goal for Schmitt, because this does not lead to a better world, but to becoming a plaything in a policy made by others. What became of this foreign-policy self-assertion recipe of 1932 in the years that followed is well known. In terms of domestic policy, it is a guide to the destruction of democracy: public discourse is reduced to rhetoric, and political compromise appears as a sign of weakness.

The pacifist variant of politicization follows the liberal model. The essence of politics is seen here in the constructive handling of plurality. Dissent becomes the engine of public discourse, parliament becomes a place of argumentative (or at least programmatic) competition; divergent opinions do not remain unrelated to one another. The ideological enemy thus becomes a political opponent who is not only expected to do evil: His combativeness in the political process helps to improve one's own position. After all, political discourse only gains momentum when the opponents do not represent dogmatic claims to truth, but both have something at stake in terms of content. At the end of the day, (hopefully intelligent) compromises will be found.

Warlike politicization ultimately amounts to moralization. Moralization is always associated with zeal, indignation and emotion. Anyone who moralizes is no longer capable of compromise, because there is too much at stake when one has put one's values on the line (Luhmann 1978). One is then involved in the conflict, so to speak, as a whole person.

Pacifist politicization, on the other hand, does not present the opponent as a person but as a role bearer ("Rollenträger"), namely as a political adversary. He can only fulfill his function as a sparring partner if the conflict is not escalated to such an extent that he, the political opponent, is ultimately denied legitimacy. That is, in order for the conflict to become politically productive, the opponent's statements must be seen as an expression of legitimate pluralism. Only when dissent is understood as legitimate in principle can a political discourse develop in which scientific expertise is not only used for short-term, strategic purposes.

What is the interim conclusion? Politics can only understand scientific expertise as a resource for argumentation if it participates in the ethos of science. In order to strengthen the argumentation and justification constraints on the part of politics, it is helpful if science does not speak with one voice. Only expert dissent – albeit institutionally coordinated and well justified – makes it clear what is at stake in a specific case and what room for maneuver there is for policymakers to make decisions.

3. Inter- and transdisciplinarity – on the organization of policy advice

In the pandemic, policy advice itself became a political issue. There have been a number of criticisms, for example that it was not transparent who was invited as an expert in the run-up to national government summits. Or: which opinions from the scientific community were

incorporated into the political deliberations and in what form. Sometimes it seemed as if politicians only took into account those voices that fitted their preconceived goals. How should policy advice be organized in order to be able to react appropriately to crises?

First, the expertise needed by policymakers depends on the type of crisis. *Acute crises* require quick and clear decisions on the part of policymakers. The task force model meets this requirement. It helps to deal with an emergency in the short term; it is geared toward scientific and technical management of the crisis. In the case of the coronavirus crisis, therefore, the expert committees were primarily made up of medical, virological and epidemiological experts. In acute crises, as we have already heard, scientific knowledge quickly becomes a political constraint.

Chronic crises, i.e., longer-term, conflictual crises in which the right interpretation of the crisis and the right political strategy are fought over, formulate new requirements for political consulting. The "one-chamber model" (task force) does not match the complexity of the problem once a health crisis (like COVID-19) has also developed into an economic crisis, an education crisis and a (political) crisis of confidence. The coronavirus crisis shows: a purely medical problem framing (with health protection as absolute priority) is questioned as soon as the emergency seems to be overcome. As soon as debates erupt about the proportionality of policy measures, the circle of relevant expertise inevitably expands. In addition to medicine, complexity science and virology, other disciplines then become relevant, such as economics, sociology, technology assessment or ethics. What is needed in chronic crises is therefore "strong" interdisciplinarity (Kastenhofer 2010).

However, beyond science, the voices of cultural practitioners, churches, NGOs and citizens should also be heard. After all, the development of a political strategy is not about the one "scientifically correct" solution, but ultimately about weighing up interests and value decisions. Especially in crises, people's experiential knowledge is an important corrective for a science that owes its performance to extreme specialization and ultimately to the fact that it ignores the vast majority of problems and perspectives. Science and technology research has shown on the basis of numerous empirical case studies that the knowledge of (informed) laypersons is an important corrective or supplement to the professional knowledge of experts in complex problems (Sismondo 2010).

In view of the required inter- and transdisciplinarity, an advisory body would probably be best set up as a multi-level model. In this model, there would of course also be a virological task force, as was set up in Austria at the beginning of the crisis by Health Minister Rudolf Anschober. This would be the "lower house," so to speak. Here, it's all about quick answers to urgent problems. In addition, we would have an "upper house," so to speak, in which many disciplines and perspectives are represented. Here, there would be room for interdisciplinary deliberation processes on fundamental questions of strategy and value.

The public should also be involved in these value debates. For example, a series of mini-publics would be conceivable to give informed citizens the opportunity to contribute to political decision-making within the framework of organized deliberation processes (cf. Setälä 2017). Such participatory experiments have a tradition in technology assessment and have also been thoroughly tested (Abels/Bora 2013). Of course, these participatory methods also provoke critical inquiries, for example about representativeness, legitimacy, or the power imbalance between experts and laypersons (Bogner 2012). But these are detailed questions at this point.

More important, in my view, is the fundamental insight that it is only within the framework of an inter- or transdisciplinary advisory body that potential expert dissent can be made fruitful in the first place, also for the consulting professionals themselves. Only within the framework of an institutionalized discussion forum can dissenting voices develop a systematic compulsion for the experts involved to relativize or elaborate their own position. Without such a body, even opposing assessments and recommendations remain without comment next to each other and move the acting policy sometimes in this direction, sometimes in that direction, without also explaining sufficiently why a certain incidence value is first a catastrophe and then suddenly the goal of all efforts.

Even if the critical public is always suspicious of the establishment of new expert commissions: It is only within the framework of such a body that the plurality and diversity of scientific perspectives on the pandemic can be made politically productive. For one thing, the committee structure ensures that expert dissent does not come across as "wild," uncoordinated polyphony. Second, it becomes easier to understand whose expertise policymakers are basing their decision-making processes on. And third, such a commission increases the pressure on policymakers to justify their decisions with reference to relevant expertise. Against the background of the argumentation developed here, it becomes clear that the GECKO is an important step in the right direction. At the same time, however, weaknesses in its institutional design also become apparent.

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