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POLITICAL EPISTEMOLOGY

ABSTRACT: *Normative political epistemologists, such as epistemic democrats, study whether political decision makers can, in principle, be expected to know what they need to know if they are to make wise public policy. Empirical political epistemologists study the content and sources of real-world political actors' knowledge and interpretations of knowledge. In recent years, empirical political epistemologists have taken up the study of the ideas of political actors other than voters, such as bureaucrats and politicians. Normative political epistemologists could follow this lead if they were to focus on the technocratic orientation of nearly all political actors in the West: that is, on their desire to solve social and economic problems. Since most technocratic policy is made by political elites, the reliability of elites' knowledge of the causes of and cures for social and economic problems is a natural topic for normative political epistemology.*

With this issue, *Critical Review* concludes twenty-five years of publication.[1] When the journal began to appear under the Routledge label in 2007, I reviewed our first two decades in an article that named human ignorance and epistemological realism as our touchstones and called for a theory of politics and government that would take full account of people's epistemic limitations (Friedman 2007). I doubted that this was a realistic prospect—but I was unaware of what was already happening. In empirical political science, attention had begun to turn to political actors' *ideas*.[2] As Daniel

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Béland and Robert Henry Cox (2011, 3) wrote in *Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research*, "ideas provide us with interpretive frameworks that make us see some facts as important and others as less so." The ideational turn leads to "a vision of politics as the struggle for power and control among people who are motivated by myriad ideas," which "might include their perceived interests but also their ideals, their pride, and so on." These ideas are products of cognitions that "are connected to the material world only via our interpretations of our surroundings," such that they may be based on "a multitude of sensory perceptions" or "on no connection to reality at all." At the same time, in normative political philosophy, "epistemic democrats" were beginning to evaluate democracy according to its ability to pool and generate the knowledge necessary to make wise public policy.[3] Where knowledge and ideas are being investigated, an epistemology that allows for ignorance and fallibility cannot be far behind.

Below, we present two sets of reflections on the empirical and theoretical movements toward political epistemology. First is the transcript of an August, 2013 American Political Science Association (APSA) panel on the empirical and normative implications of ideas in politics. I would like to thank Scott L. Althaus, Mark Bevir, Hélène Landemore, Rogers M. Smith, and Susan C. Stokes for making the panel a success. It launched a petition drive to create an official APSA section devoted to political epistemology; the petition was approved in March 2014, and the political epistemology section will be launched in August 2014.

After the APSA panel discussion we present a symposium on a pivotal new work of epistemic democratic theory, Hélène Landemore's *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many* (Landemore 2013). I will not discuss the individual symposium papers systematically but will instead thank their authors—Jason Brennan, Paul Gunn, Jamie Kelly, Sanford Levinson, Russell Muirhead, Paul Quirk, Ilya Somin, Stephen G. W. Stich, and Landemore herself—for clarifying some of the most important issues facing normative political epistemology.[4] In the remainder of this introduction, I will explore one of these issues: the implications of empirical political epistemology for normative political epistemology and vice versa.

Ideas, Interests, and Values in Empirical Political Epistemology

Political scientists who specialize in public opinion tend to focus their attention on what *voters* know. But ideational political epistemologists

have a hidden strength: They have been focusing on the ideas of political actors other than voters.

While *Critical Review*'s pursuit of political epistemology has filled its pages with reflections on mass opinion, ordinary citizens are not the only political actors and they are probably not the most significant ones. For one thing, politicians, journalists, political activists, and cultural figures shape the ideas of voters. If we want to understand public opinion, we should be studying the ideas of those who influence ordinary voters, but political scientists have been loath to do so. For another thing, legislators, judges, bureaucratic policy makers, administrative-law judges, and these decision makers' researchers and staffers directly control public policy, usually out of voters' sight.[5] Even an electorate far more attentive to politics than is the real electorate could not keep track of federal, state, and local statutory and administrative law in all its volume, nor understand its provisions, nor grasp its manifold implications—topics that divide and confuse full-time specialists. So it makes little sense to confine the study of ideas in politics to the ideas of voters. Yet, until recently, public opinion was the only type of opinion to which political scientists devoted much attention.

A spectator would be entitled to ask what political scientists *were* studying if not political actors' ideas. If I may radically oversimplify, they were studying the distribution of political power and therefore were answering the question: "Who governs?"[6] While this research preoccupation is not objectionable in itself, it distorts our understanding of politics and government when it is pursued to the exclusion of studying political ideas.

The distribution of power is important only inasmuch as this power is used. And it cannot be used unless those who hold power have ideas about what they should do with it. Too often political scientists have treated the political actor's question—"How should I use my share of political power?"—as if it answered itself. Thus, it is often assumed that political actors automatically (as it were) use their power to advance their own interests. Therefore what should matter to the political scientist is who has power, which will be a good proxy for whose interests are served. This traditional perspective may seem like hard-boiled realism, but it creates a highly selective picture of politics and government that is misleading in at least three respects:

1. Self-interest does not define itself. A self-interested political actor must *interpret* which policies might advance her interests. Fallible egoists will make interpretive mistakes. As Walter Lippmann (1922, 118) put it in *Public Opinion*, "there is no magic in ownership which enables a business man to know what laws will make him prosper." The study of political ideas has to make room for political actors' erroneous ideas. This cannot be done if ideas are reduced to interests, as this reduction assumes that the actors and the political analyst *know* what their interests are and which policies will further those interests.
2. While there is plenty of self-interestedness in politics, it is wrong to assume that *most* political action is self-interested. From voters to legislators, judges, and bureaucrats, political actors tend—in the West, at least—to take actions that they think will serve the public good (Lewin 1991). The notion that politics is chiefly a matter of self-interest is more an article of faith than an empirical regularity.[7] This faith blinds us to such important phenomena as political ideologies. Ideologies are elaborate, non-self-interested answers to the question, "How should I use my share of political power?"
3. Actors pursuing the public good, like actors pursuing self-interest, must interpret which policies will serve that end. They, too, may miscalculate. Consider what might be called "the fact of policy debate." In policy debate, advocates of different interpretations of whether policies will serve the public good are pitted against each other. Why is labor-force participation so low, and what policies might correct it? Will raising the minimum wage cost low-wage workers so many jobs that it outweighs the positive effect on wages? Will the Affordable Care Act improve the quality and accessibility of health care or will it make matters worse? In each case the question is whether a policy will be an *effective* means to *shared* ends.[8] This is a question of great complexity about which it is easy to be mistaken. Whenever there is a policy debate of this kind, at least one side in the debate *must* be mistaken.

A political science that neglects these three points is abstracted from many of the most important aspects of politics and government. By tacitly challenging the self-interest assumption, therefore, the ideational turn in empirical political science could bring about a radical reorientation toward reality. But different types of political ideas need to be

distinguished from each other. Political actors have *strategic* ideas about how to accomplish their objectives: how to rally support for a new law, for example. But they also have *normative* and *empirical* ideas about which objectives are worth accomplishing. These are the ideas around which policy debate is organized.

The most straightforward type of normative idea is a value, i.e., a belief about the desirability of an end. In the symposium on *Democratic Reason*, Muirhead contends that Landemore gives insufficient attention to politics as an arena for fighting about ends. A political epistemology of ends would certainly be useful. Where do various people get their values? An empirical political epistemologist could study, for example, cultural influences on the debate over gay marriage. In a period of two decades, American public opinion reversed itself on this question. Where did the new, tolerationist ideas come from? Were entertainment media the source of these ideas at the mass level? Political scientists do almost no research on such questions.

Muirhead, however, does not say that values are the only type of normative political idea. Value commitments are indispensable preconditions of action, but a government policy cannot simply enact a value. Most policies reflect detailed ideas about how a value or values can best be furthered. This is why policy disputes so often occur *despite* shared values among the disputants. The value provides a target. But the hardest part in answering the practical question—"How should I use my share of political power?"—often involves finding the answers to attendant empirical questions: What *are* the causes of the problem our policies are designed to solve? What *will be* the effects of a given policy?

Edward Carmines and James Stimson (1980) call such questions "hard" ones. In contrast, they call "valence" (Stokes 1963, 373) or value questions "easy." On a question of values, as Max Weber (1918, 117) recognized, one's decision is simple, for values are matters of axiomatic faith: there one stands and can do no other. Empirical issues, while not nearly as dramatic as valence issues, are much harder to decide. Unlike values, about which disputation quickly reaches an impasse over ultimate ends, the empirical effects of a public policy can be parsed with a wealth of data and many different theories. To those who are aware of the flaws in the data and the gaps in the theories, there is no answer so definite as a moral stand would be. The normative question of whether less unemployment is desirable is relatively easy; the empirical question of how to achieve this aim at a reasonable cost is relatively hard.

As Landemore (2013, 216) points out, "a lot of apparent 'value pluralism'—for example, the disagreement between Democrats and Republicans over the legitimate size of government—can arguably be explained by a disagreement about facts, including complicated facts such as causal relationships between big government and efficient spending in a given social and economic context." Such factual questions are the bread and butter of real-world politics and government. But even more obviously than the answers to values questions, the answers to factual questions can be incorrect. Therefore, empirical research on the sources of people's factual beliefs is grist for theoretical reflection. If the ideas in question are not strategic; if they are ideas about policy means, not valuational ends; and if they are, therefore, empirical claims about how to attain a given value, then are the sources of these claims *reliable*? This is one way of formulating a crucial question of normative political epistemology.

Normative Political Epistemology without Begging the Question

I have argued that attention to political actors' ideas should bring a welcome dose of realism to political science. Yet the critics of Landemore's work of normative political epistemology tend to say that her optimistic view of the epistemic capacities of democracy is unrealistic. Brennan, Gunn, Quirk, and Somin each disputes Landemore's assumption that ordinary citizens do or can know enough to be able to decide policy debates accurately. The critics are, in various ways, saying the following: The cause of long-term unemployment, the effects of raising the minimum wage, the costs and benefits of the Affordable Care Act, and so on, ad infinitum, are *complex* issues. So why should we think that voters (or other political actors) are capable of answering them with reliable accuracy?

Epistemic democrats suggest that voters can do this because they model voter decisions on the basis of constructs such as the Condorcet Jury Theorem and the Diversity Trumps Ability Theorem. The first theorem, coupled with the assumption that voters are more likely than not to be right about a given issue, produces an epistemic defense of voting. The second theorem, as Landemore emphasizes in her reply,[9] assumes that an

"oracle" delivers the truth and that everyone involved in a deliberation immediately sees this truth as self-evident in a "eureka moment." Thus, epistemic democrats seem to be begging the question they themselves have put on the table: Are the people likely to make accurate public-policy decisions? An affirmative answer, after all, is built into their models.

However, it is not quite true that they are begging the question. Landemore's eureka thesis, for example, is an empirical claim that could be true. So, too, is the assumption that voters will tend to get things right. In both cases the background tenet seems to be the belief that at bottom, the right answer to policy questions is intuitively obvious. In challenging this belief, our symposium opens up a wide area for future research in political epistemology. But how can this research be conducted?

Let me argue against the strategy that Brennan uses. He infers backwards from voters' opinions to the inaccuracy of voters' information. If voters endorse an unwise policy then they must be misinformed. Setting aside the logic of this claim, I will focus only on Brennan's method for determining which policies are bad, which entails farming out the evaluation of policies to social scientists. Thus, Brennan thinks that the widespread unpopularity of measures endorsed by economists, such as open borders, directly contradicts Landemore's assumption that voters' judgments tend to be accurate. Yet Brennan is presupposing that *economists'* judgments tend to be accurate. As it happens, philosophers of social science generally concur that economics is peculiarly impervious to empirical evidence.[10] If they are right, then "expertise" in economics amounts to little more than the ability to produce applications of theories the "expert" has learned in graduate school, theories with questionable relevance to reality. In any case, we should not simply assume that economists or any other group of self-described experts have the necessary knowledge of a complex reality. This would beg the question of political epistemology in their favor.

In his contribution to the symposium, Alfred Moore (2014) notices this problem and asks who is to be defined as an expert. But his answer seems to be that the public should decide who counts as an expert, which would beg the epistemic question in favor of the public. If we have reason to doubt that ordinary voters can master the complexities of public policy, such that they need to rely on experts, what reason have we to think that they can distinguish true experts from false ones? In making this distinction, the public will have to use proxies for expertise such as academic credentials, demeanor, and so forth. But this would put

the effective power back into the hands of the so-called experts who confer the credentials, project confidence, etc., begging the question in *their* favor.

Political Epistemology as "Grand Theory"

Conundrums such as these suggest that normative political epistemologists need a different strategy. I have two proposals.

First, we should follow Landemore's methodological approach, which does not invoke *first-order* political judgments. By that I mean judgments about the wisdom of particular public policies. The reliability of such judgments is in question in normative political-epistemology research. We can hardly answer this question by appealing to our own political judgments or those of other political actors, such as economists. Any such appeal will inevitably presuppose that we, or they, possess the very thing that is in doubt: reliable first-order policy "expertise."

Brennan's argument is that democracy is unwise because voters favor policies that economists oppose. By contrast, Landemore's argument is not that democracy is wise because voters favor what she thinks they should favor. Instead she invokes formal properties of deliberation and aggregation to show how democracy would tend to produce wise policies—given the assumptions of the models. By appealing beyond her first-order political judgments (whatever they might be), she enables political epistemology to be something other than a dreary exercise in the recycling of political epistemologists' own politics in the guise of theory. If anything, a worthwhile political epistemology should be able to *change* first-order political judgments, including those of political theorists. Landemore (2013, xv) begins her book by explaining that she strongly disagreed with French voters' rejection of the EU Constitution. But she came to question her first-order judgment when thinking about the second-order implications of the Law of Large Numbers. If normative political epistemology is to serve any purpose, it is to enable us to transcend and even reverse our given predilections. One could say the same thing about any worthwhile philosophy or empirical science.

Now the second-order considerations to which Landemore appeals are vulnerable because they rely on the assumed tendency of voters and deliberators to "get it right," e.g., in eureka moments. But instead of challenging this assumption by relying on the question-begging notion that social scientists, such as economists, tend to have reliable first-order

judgments, we could appeal to other second-order considerations—such as considerations about modern society. Is it likely that we are intuitively well equipped to have a eureka moment when a truth about modern society is presented to us? Quirk has argued elsewhere that this is implausible given the gap between the modern environment and the environment of evolutionary adaptation, interpreted as the environment facing hunters and gatherers (Kuklinski and Quirk 2000). But there are third-order counterarguments, since the reliability of evolutionary psychology is not clear.[11] And there are competing second-order considerations. Among these is the fact that natural science has managed to get around hard-wired perceptions such as optical illusions; these must be even stronger than any mental modules that might contribute to our political intuitions. So even if our intuitions are maladapted to modern society, we might be able to circumvent them. Testing this argument would require political epistemologists to delve into the philosophy of natural science.

Those are only some of the possibilities for second-order political epistemology. They point to a much broader agenda for political epistemologists than they have pursued thus far. If we are to completely forswear first-order political claims in our epistemological theorizing, as I think we must, then it would seem that normative political epistemology must aim to be "grand theory" in the tradition of Rousseau, Marx, and Habermas. A theory about the reliability of our ideas about modern society *is* a grand theory whether we admit it or not.

Political Epistemology and Technocracy

My second suggestion has to do with the scope of normative political epistemology. If normative political epistemologists are to consider the beliefs of political actors other than ordinary voters, putting normative epistemology under the rubric of "democratic theory" is a mistake.

When Brennan challenges the epistemic reliability of voters by comparing their views unfavorably with the opinions of economists, he is expressing the main real-world challenge to democratic authority: the challenge of what Landemore's reply calls "expertocracy." But if the comparison between "experts'" knowledge and ordinary citizens' knowledge is to be fair, we must be as critical of the former as of the latter. This will require empirical research on the educational and other cultural determinants of the putative experts' opinions (for example,

what they learn in graduate school). It is pointless to try to stretch "democratic theory" to accommodate this type of inquiry. Moreover, an epistemological evaluation of expertocracy would seem to require normative theorists to become serious contributors to the philosophy of the *social* sciences—where, of course, the "scientific" status of these disciplines is a central issue. Again, it is hard to see how this type of research is more than tangentially a contribution to democratic theory.

Rather than trying to squeeze the study of expertocracy into the "democracy" box, we might be better served by thinking about what both experts and ordinary citizens are trying to do when they engage in or observe policy debate. As I have already suggested, what they are often trying to do is solve perceived social and economic problems. Popper (1966, 157ff.) called this type of activity "piecemeal social engineering," but in the interim "social engineering" has acquired totalitarian implications that contradict what Popper had in mind. We might instead call a social-and-economic-problem-solving polity "utilitarian" (Goodin 1995), but what is usually considered a social or economic problem is, as Popper advised, distress or misery. The aim of putative experts and citizens, then, is negative-utilitarian, not the augmentation of happiness. One might cobble together a new name out of typical organizational forms, e.g., the "regulatory/redistributive" state, but that would be awkward and in some senses misleading.

I propose "technocracy." While this term usually implies the rule of experts, Landemore's "expertocracy" more directly names the putatively knowledgeable elites in a technocracy.[12] *Technocracy* would, in my proposed usage, be an umbrella term covering both expertocrats and ordinary citizens, who are often assumed—both by themselves and by political theorists—to be competent to diagnose and cure social and economic problems.

Political epistemologists of technocracy could more clearly compare the epistemic reliability of experts and the public by focusing on the types of issues that are actually disputed in real-world technocracies. Gunn, in particular, presses Landemore on whether the typical problems facing modern polities are comparable to her sole real-world example: efforts by New Haven residents to reduce crime on a particular bridge. A political epistemologist of technocracy might be able to make the case that democratic technocracy is suitable to meeting the epistemic challenges of locally observable social problems, such as those on a bridge, but that expertocracy is needed for non-local conditions. In turn,

second-order considerations (such as "local observability"), once clearly invoked, could be disputed on philosophy-of-science grounds.

In addition to encouraging attention to the reliability of so-called experts, the "technocratic" label would give us the conceptual space to ask another question: whether *any* identifiable group of people, whatever their credentials, can plausibly be thought to have reliable technocratic knowledge. That question, raised in particular by Somin, seems to me to precede and possibly pre-empt the question of *who* has the knowledge, and thus the question of who should rule. In posing the traditional question of whether "the one, the few, or the many" should rule, political epistemologists may once again be begging the epistemological question. Saying this is one way of reiterating that political epistemology can mark a radical departure from the theoretical status quo if its boundaries are capacious enough.

NOTES

1. In reality, the first issue, dated Winter 1987-88, appeared 27 years ago. See Friedman 2007, 15n1.
2. See Blyth 2003 and Béland and Cox 2011 for surveys. Bevir 2010 is an important recent example of empirical political epistemology applied to elite political actors.
3. The literature on epistemic democracy has grown rapidly. Estlund 2008 sets some theoretical limits on epistemic-democratic claims. Ober 2008 is an extensive treatment of the consequences of democracy for Athens. Landemore and Elster, eds., 2012 presents some of the best work in the field. Talisse 2004, 2005, 2007, 2009, and 2010 investigate democracy as a source of *moral* knowledge.
4. See Brennan 2014, Gunn 2014, Kelly 2014, Landemore 2014, Levinson 2014, Moore 2014, Muirhead 2014, Quirk 2014, Somin 2014, and Stich 2014.
5. See DeCanio 2000, 2006, and 2007.
6. Dahl 1961.
7. See the twentieth-anniversary symposium on Lewin 1991 in *Critical Review* 23(3).
8. See Murakami 2008 and 2010.
9. Landemore 2014; see also Landemore and Page forthcoming.
10. E.g., Mirowski 1991, Hausman 1992, Rosenberg 1992, Lawson 1997, Hodgson 2001, and Reiss 2008.
11. See Cochran and Harpending 2009, Lieberman 2013, and Richerson and Boyd 2005, for example.
12. The best term of all, despite its obscurity, might be *epistocracy*. But Estlund (2008) has already applied this term both more broadly and more narrowly than what we need (as has Brennan in the symposium). Too broadly, he includes "experts" about ends as well as means under the "epistocracy" banner. Too narrowly, he assumes that epistocrats must constitute an elite. Historically, however, the people

at large have often believed, and still often believe, that they have the necessary problem-solving expertise. This is the very belief that epistemic democrats defend, and we cannot presuppose that it is wrong.

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