Should experts influence citizens’ judgment?

The problem of the proper role of knowledge in political decision-making is a traditional and major concern for political philosophers. In the last years, such debate has found a renewed interest and the focus has been cast on the role of experts within democratic societies: does making room for experts in policy-making amount to a loss of democracy, whose core value is that of political equality? The problem is particularly thorny if we consider the fact that, given the complexity of contemporary societies, not only it is simply impossible for every citizen to participate intelligently on each and every political issue, but also that it is necessary to rely on experts to reach sound political decisions. For these reasons, it has been argued for a division of labour between experts and citizens (Dewey 1927; Christiano 1996; 2012; Urbinati 2006). According to this view, citizens can set an agenda for pursuing social problems, that need to be identified by experts, and specify the aims of the policies that cope with these problems, while experts define the means and strategies to pursue such aims. The integration between these processes is grounded by political deliberation that facilitates a reasoned exchanged between the facts provided by experts and the values developed by citizens. In this sense, the division of labour is usually based on the assumption that experts should (and can) provide neutral, apolitical, technical advice to representatives and citizens, so to be, as Winston Churchill famously stated, “on tap but not on top”. In this paper, we challenge this view by claiming that it is grounded on problematic epistemological and political premises. Our aim is to evaluate and provide a better understanding of the role of experts within democratic societies, and to understand whether, how, and to what extent experts’ judgments should influence citizens’ political judgments.

We start by arguing that the division of labour perspective relies on a simplistic conception of the fact/value distinction and of the division between science and politics. Indeed, not only judgments of value are deeply embedded in the practice of science (Kitcher 2001), but also science is never the pursuit of truth full stop, but the pursuit of those truths scientists find significant (Dewey 1988). Moreover, the common idea which distinguishes science, intended as the realm of agreement, from ethics, intended as the realm of disagreement, is flawed. Scientists and technical experts disagree strongly about states of affairs, levels of risk and uncertainty, policy efficiency, etc. Finally, to ground the division of labour on the distinction is controversial also because of the difficulties citizens have in evaluating the claims of experts (Brewer 1997), and because it is not at all clear whether and how laypeople can identify experts (Goldman 1999; 2001).

Given this simplistic epistemological framework, division of labour accounts are not able to describe and guide the political role of experts, the values that are conveyed by their proposals, and the normative standards against which these claims should be assessed. Since experts
exercise a political role and their proposals convey values, their claims should not only be evaluated for their correctness but for their political viability and legitimacy as well. A proper account of the role of experts within democratic society should then provide standards to assess whether their claims are politically justified (Bertram 1997; White and Ypi 2011), namely grounded on reasons that can be accepted by a political community. The role of political deliberation is not only to facilitate experts in enabling citizens to make sensible political judgements but to allow members of the demos to critically assess if the proposals of experts are politically justifiable.

References