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L'expertise en situation

Expertise in real life

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This English translation has not been published in printed form/Cette traduction anglaise n'a pas été publiée sous forme imprimée.

- 1 In society some would call a society of risk, where individuals are increasingly less willing to accept the chance factor, experts play a major role in analysing difficult situations and giving a direction to what is done. However their authority and credibility are sometimes called into question either by facts which do not always correspond to their predictions or by citizens who now tend to demand the right to judge matters themselves and take an active part in decisions concerning them. Expertise has become a delicate issue because of the complexity of the problems involved particularly those with a risk element caused by human activity and problems which are often at the limits of current scientific knowledge.
- 2 There are many and varied works on expertise which are stem from or are referred back to during crisis situations. For example, the work of Yves Trépos has thus helped define the foundations of an expertise sociology which many other authors consider a reference work. They were used as the basis for a research seminar organised by the "Mediations in specialized information and communication" team at the LERASS¹. This research has spread from its original context in Toulouse and led to this file whose aim is to take part in the process of this subject being placed in a much broader context. Contributions have been made by researchers from varied disciplinary backgrounds (sociology, history, education sciences, information and communication sciences) which shed light on the plurality of the situations encountered and thus provide information on the interactions between expertise and communication, subjects that have been little discussed until now. Indeed, communication seems particularly significant in the acquisition and capitalization of knowledge as well as in collective problem-solving practices and in the

dissemination of results to those concerned. Those receiving the information may have varying degrees of specialization and thus those results may need to be enriched, adapted or translated.

- 3 Expertise is a multiple concept and does not always cover important matters for society. It may be limited to specific professional knowledge like, say, knowledge of insurance matters or a professional association's knowledge which they consider deserves more recognition. It therefore provokes varied questions regarding its nature and practices, its importance in our contemporary societies (particularly regarding its media appearances), the relationships between experts, the public and decision-makers or the difference between a specialist and an expert. Two types of articles can be distinguished in the file depending on whether they discuss the current state of knowledge and aim to discuss epistemological matters or are limited to a specific field with discussion of a given case study.
- 4 Jean-Yves Trépos will open the proceedings. The author shows the variety of possible situations where an expert intervenes in a context with varying degrees of uncertainty. The sociologist has analysed instances of expertise reported in the daily press and highlighted different categories, according to whether the problem is the subject of debate - called "Stage" - and to the existence of possible alternative solutions. To be recognised, expertise requires trust and yet experts are increasingly called into question particularly since certain events like Chernobyl. Also many misunderstandings and controversies have arisen involving the opposing views of experts, counter-experts and laymen and women. Ordinary people's demands to take part in societal choices are in fact at the very heart of this debate. The growing success of these demands has deeply modified how expertise is performed and forced experts to adopt adaptation strategies. The author shows how the process of expertise is not more important for society than the act itself. It contributes to the stability of decision-making bodies by providing technical arguments but expertise is really only accepted in the context of debate. From this standpoint, experts can be considered on the same footing as others involved in negotiating the points at stake underlying the matter in hand.
- 5 Similar concerns are at the centre of Lennart Sjöberg's work on communication of risks and the relationships between the public and experts in western societies. He focuses on situations in which experts and part of the public have different opinions with the former judging there is a low level of risk and the latter a high risk. This psychologist gives the example of the procedure involved in choosing a site to house nuclear waste in Sweden. He first explains how this situation fits into the Swedish national context and goes on to analyze how the public perception of risk is constructed based on enquiries and surveys organized for political and institutional ends. The author thus highlights the diverging views of those involved which are based on differing representations and ways of thinking. As in certain cases analyzed previously, a counter-expertise is developing within the public, offering an alternative to conclusions provided by official experts. The notion of trust is more in-depth as it refers to the social dimension of the problem and also to certain knowledge and its limits. Also Lennart Sjöberg questions the fact that the perception of risk by experts is only founded on objective data rather than emotion or other subjective parameters and shows that the way experts are inclined to view risks can be sometimes be based on a similar schema to that of laymen and women.
- 6 Also in the field of support for decision-making, Daniel Guy and Véronique Bedin analyze the communicational processes at work in the political and administrative sphere by

focusing on so-called "authorized" texts like study reports, expertise reports and other accompanying white papers. They give an up-to-date report on the various written traces linked to the French *Emploi-Jeunes* ("Youth Employment") law between July 2nd 1997 and April 17th 1998 (articles, regulatory texts, commission reports, union leaflets, interviews, letters, faxes and so on). Institutional writing contributes to the repositioning of social forms of collective action. When a study report thought to be authoritative is published as part of a decision-making process, its conclusions are quickly integrated into the political practice of those involved. The report is at the heart of any new propositions through the comments and interpretations it engenders and becomes the main reference for all subsequent thought on the matter. In this way, it reveals itself to be a determining factor in decision-making and establishes a relationship of co-determination between political practices and the "authorized" text. This is why the authors consider that the conclusions of a report are even better received and perceived if the report's architecture is well adapted to practices.

- 7 This question also arises in Arlette Bouzon's contribution which discusses industrial risks by focusing on the conception phenomenon and collective practices within organisations. The article is based on the results of a field study in space industry companies and covers the varied forms of expertise which may exist. She analyzes the multiplicity of internal and external communicational networks involving different specialists and the varied investigation methods which are used. She also discusses the situation of experts who sometimes have difficulty obtaining recognition in their respective organisations even if a more positive appraisal of technical careers is often the subject of much managerial discourse. She examines the conditions of acquisition, capitalisation and implementation of expertise in companies and underlines the importance of communication in this management of knowledge and in the decision-making process. However the analysis of practices and objects used (design journals, study reports, risk analysis etc.) shows that the communicational dimension is often forgotten and even badly handled in an essentially technical universe.
- 8 Conversely communication is very much present in the strategy of the Association Française des Professionnels de l'Information and de la Documentation (ADBS, French professional association for librarians and information professionals) and Viviane Couzinet analyzes the role of this association in the construction of information professionals' identity. Since its creation, the ADBS has promoted the skills of its members and attempted to build bridges with researchers and other organisations in the information sector. Through this quasi-militant form of professionalization, the association's aim is to improve the skill level of the socio-professional group it represents. The article uses a study of the journal "*Documentaliste - Sciences de l'information*" which involves teacher-researchers in its way of functioning and also shows how the association promotes the emergence of experts in the information field who are recognised and appreciated by companies particularly through the implementation of a certification procedure for professionals working in that area.
- 9 Gérard Régimbeau also studies promotional development with an analysis of a format which has not been the subject of much research work - exhibition catalogues. The author concentrates on expertise in art which consists of evaluating an objet and assigning it value for reasons linked to heritage, commerce or science. This form of expertise can be distinguished from the concept of legitimization proposed by the sociology of art and culture with which it has a relationship of reciprocity. As the recognition of works

depends on an informational set necessary for cultural transmission, Gérard Régimbeau evaluates the role played by publications in the transmission and legitimization of expertise. He focuses on the results of a quantitative bibliographical study applied to the production of information in the field of contemporary arts and uses the Supports-Surfaces group of artists as an example. In this context, journals play a major role and books (general overviews or monographs) are becoming gradually more important in bibliographic references but exhibition catalogues - which have historically been seen as of "prime" importance - play an essential initial and retrospective mediatory role in the qualification of works and artists.

- 10 The last two articles in this file concern History. Josiane Demeurisse discusses cases in which experts are called upon to intervene in a sector which is not really their own. Increasingly History creates links with other disciplines to support ideas linked to its own subjects and the technological advances used help provide specialists with elements to back up their theses. However the results of expertise also provoke debate and scientific controversies. This contribution particularly concentrates on two cases - the deaths of Napoleon and of Louis XVII, - and retraces the stages of technical expertise from the life sciences. As a starting point the author uses the importance of presence and the motivating strategies of those who ordered these two expertise works to examine the support they provide for the theories at hand. He also conveys all the complexity and the wealth of situations in which historical concerns are twinned with ideological, economic or financial stakes. By putting the exploitation and interpretation of results from such partnerships into perspective, the researcher finally asks questions regarding the notions of "scientific truth" and "absolute" proof.
- 11 Patrick Fraysse examines the construction of expertise by focusing on a methodological innovation. He analyse the relationships between two communities of professionals - historians and heritage curators - and retraces the evolution of curators who become experts and are recognized as such by historians. Curators acquired this status by providing dates corresponding to the architecture of a town and by doing so enabled the community of historians to answer a hitherto unsolved question about the Middle Ages. This form of expertise is revealed to be the fruit of a combination of hybrid scientific and technical knowledge transposed to a field which had not been covered in this way until then. This case study enables the author to link expertise, history and innovation and revisit the notion of a document when used to aliment a historian's studies. The author thus portrays the work on renovating History's investigation methods started by the Annales School. Clearly no spheres of activity appear to be free from the influence of expertise and its communication.

NOTES

1. The LERASS (Applied Research in Social Science Laboratory) is part of Paul Sabatier Toulouse 3 University.