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# Expert Authority in Crisis: Making Authority Real through Struggle

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## Abstract

There is an emerging consensus both within the social scientific research community and more widely in the public domain that expert authority is 'in trouble'. However, there is much greater disagreement over the scope and scale of this trouble and what it might mean for the nature, status and significance of expert authority in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This paper identifies and assesses three different narratives concerning the crisis in expert authority. These constitute the 'de-legitimation narrative', the 'demystification narrative', and the 'decomposition narrative.' They can be seen as responses to the breakdown in the implicit social contract between 'experts', 'publics', and 'states' under the extreme and continuous pressures exerted on expert authority by disjunctive change. We evaluate these various interpretations of the crisis in expert authority, particularly in terms of what they suggest about the potency and stability of the concept of expert authority in the future. In this process of evaluation, we also highlight the emergence of 'reflexive expert authority' and its implications for organizational governance as potential outcomes of this ongoing crisis in the legitimacy and status of expert workers. Consequently, the paper provides a general analytical framework for understanding the emergent narratives around expert authority in democracies and highlights how all three

narratives point to serious problems in sustaining this authority in the face of destabilizing change. Also, in developing the notion of reflexive expert authority, we contend that theorisation of expert authority needs to privilege deeper dynamics of trust and control as a core analytical focus within organization theory.

**Keywords – experts, reflexive authority, legitimacy, governance, power, control**

## **Introduction: The Breakdown of the Social Contract**

There is an emerging consensus, both within the social scientific research community and more widely in the public arena, that ‘expert authority’ is ‘in trouble’ (Busch, 2017; Collins, et al., 2020; Crouch, 2016; Davies, 2018, 2020; Eyal, 2019; Koppl, 2018; Nichols, 2017).

What sort of ‘trouble’ expert authority may be in, how deep-seated it runs, and what its long-term impact may be on the governance, organization, and management of 21<sup>st</sup> century societies is one of the key themes defining contemporary socio-political and cultural debate and our attempts, as organizational theorists, to make sense of the complex issues crystalizing around these developments.

In this paper, we intend to identify and assess the condition of, and prospects for, expert authority in contemporary societies. We have inherited an understanding of expert authority based on a conventional model tying an umbilical cord between modern science, public service, and professional expertise which no longer seems conceptually equipped to deal with the complexity of the changing dynamic it now confronts (Burns, 2019; Davies, 2018; Leicht, 2016). Indeed, this model has been so wracked by internal dissension and external critique that it no longer seems to speak to the emergence of new forms of expert power, authority, and control which cannot be accommodated within its theoretical parameters. And yet, continuing dependence on an, however attenuated, belief and trust in expertise – particularly during crises, such as a pandemic – remains a powerful, if fragile, source of public understanding, reassurance, and resilience.

While there is undoubtedly a cyclical dimension to attacks on expert authority (Eyal, 2019), the emerging scale and intensity of the critique which has been gathering momentum over the

last decade or so seems to present an existential threat to its survivability in anything like its recognizable institutional form and established organizational practice. Indeed, many analysts and commentators (Busch, 2017; Davies, 2020; Nichols, 2017) have argued that we are at a ‘critical conjuncture’ of various developments which have the potential to undermine whatever residual communal belief remains in the collective capacity of experts to solve ‘our problems’ in ways that preserve socio-political order in liberal democratic societies.

Traditionally, expert authority has sustained public trust and confidence – particularly in relation to the role it plays in governance and social regulation – through an implicit social contract between three key social actors - ‘experts’, ‘publics’, and ‘states.’ Experts enjoy a relatively high degree of autonomy and control over their ‘jurisdictional work domains’ (Abbott, 1988) in exchange for the delivery of services that effectively protect publics against the threats posed by a capricious and cruel world. States reap the political benefits from the essential role which experts play in fulfilling their primary duty of keeping their citizens safe and secure – particularly at times when emergent crises threaten to overwhelm their administrative and technical capacity to govern. This governance system can be conceptualized as ‘elite club government’ in which networks of ruling groups organizationally located at the political and administrative policy-making centre of the state are insulated from ‘excessive democratic pressure’ and legitimated through governing conventions and practices accreting over several centuries rather than through legally formalized rules and regulations (Davies, 2018; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Moran, 2007).

This implicit social contract (Shafik, 2021) – not one explicitly negotiated and formally ratified but one dependent on historically sedimented tacit understandings and informal deals – relies on a complex configuration of ‘trust and control dynamics’ underwritten by a social

democratic state and its administrative agencies. Thus, the state authorizes and delegates considerable powers of decision making and social intervention to expert groups who are expected to deliver on their side of ‘the contract’ by deploying their expertise in the furtherance of collective security, safety, and prosperity for the publics which they oversee and manage (Davies, 2018; Johnson, 1994; Saks, 2021). That expertise is presumed to be based upon disinterested, objective knowledge and specialized technical skills generated and verified through rational scientific research and evaluation (Collins et al., 2020).

It is this implicit, three-way, social contract between ruling coalitions of experts, publics, and states which has been under immense pressure, or even attack, for some time. This is driven by ruling elites convinced of the rightness and effectiveness of neoliberal policies and programmes who are increasingly sceptical about the returns that it delivers to the state. This in turn directly reinforces growing disenchantment amongst the public with ‘experts’ and their predilection to laminate self-interest with a veneer of hypocritical meritocracy (Collins et al. 2020; Frank, 2020; Sandel, 2020). As such, the public progressively pulls back from the ‘protective role’ ideologically and politically defining social democracy and managerial capitalism (Crouch, 2016; Streeck, 2014, 2016; Vormann & Weinman, 2021).

Consequently, experts find themselves in a situation in which the implicit social contract from which they once accumulated so much social capital and moral authority has all but wasted away in the face of neo-liberalization, authoritarian populism, and technological rationalization. As a result, the long term, collective benefits accruing from this partnership between experts, publics, and states – as well as the norms and rules governing it - are regarded with mounting distrust by all those who are expected to respect its implicit obligations and the responsibilities it entails (Shafik, 2021).

Within this broader context, the three narratives we identify concerning the crisis in expert authority are: ‘de-legitimation’, which highlights institutional breakdown in trust and confidence in expert authority; ‘demystification’, which prioritises neo-liberal governmentality that has rendered expert authority as merely a technocratic fixer of the neo-liberal regime; and ‘decomposition’, which foregrounds the increasingly heterogeneous and fragmented landscape of expert labour that raises questions over the foundations of its authority. These three distinctive, but overlapping, analytical narratives can be read as *responses to this breakdown in the implicit social contract between ‘experts’, ‘publics’ and ‘states,’ and the governance system it legitimated.* They each identify a dramatic shift in the balance of power between these three core social actors under the continuing and destabilizing pressures exerted by disjunctive change across the globe. While they differ in their overall assessments of the scale and severity of the breakdown in the social contract between the three core institutional actors, they agree that the traditional legitimation of expert authority cannot be sustained.

Therefore, all three narratives suggest a paradigm shift is needed in the way that expert-based modes of governance – that is, their legitimacy as authorized and accepted ways of governing – are conceptualized and operationalized. We advocate that whilst expert groups may react to their increased vilification with forms of self-defensive protectionism, they instead need to play a key role in the more ‘reflexive’ and ‘connective’ forms of expert authority and governance which are beginning to emerge out of the growing public demand for a new social contract rejecting the terms on which ‘elite club government’ rested (Crouch 2013; Newman & Clarke, 2009; Noordegraaf, 2020).

Of course, ‘expertise’, in all its manifold forms and configurations will continue to play a role in getting everyday work done in contemporary organizations and societies (Collins & Evans, 2007; Collins et al. 2020). But the critical conjuncture of a complex range of factors, examined in these narratives, come together to challenge the received model of expert authority at a time when the expert division of labour is itself undergoing root-and-branch overhaul and destabilization. The more reflexive conceptualisation emerging to replace this received model suggests fundamental changes to notions of expert authority, and the social contract it relies on, are needed which will pose both opportunities and challenges to the expert groups navigating them and the organizational theorists seeking to understand them.

The next section of the paper provides a review of the three narratives concerning the crisis in expert authority. Then, we assess each of these narrative interpretations and what they might mean for the potency and stability of expert authority in the future. This leads us to elucidation of the concept of ‘reflexive expert authority’ and its implications for how societies and organizations are governed, as expert work and workers continue their struggle to sustain their legitimacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Three Narratives on the Crisis of Expert Authority**

This section outlines the core features of each narrative on the crisis of expert authority, considering: its theoretical underpinnings, its central arguments regarding the crisis in expert authority and examples of those espousing each narrative. All highlight in alternate ways how the social contract between experts, publics, and states has been challenged which has implications for how expert authority can be understood and conceptualised going forward.



### *The De-legitimation Narrative*

This interpretation constructs an analytical narrative in which expert authority has been undergoing a prolonged ‘legitimation crisis’ which has gathered momentum since the financial crash of 2008/2009 and the neo-liberal-driven and global-wide austerity political discourse and policies that followed it over the succeeding decade (Blyth 2013; Brown 2015, 2019; Cahill & Konings, 2017).

What is envisaged here is a fundamental breakdown in the institutionalized core beliefs and mechanisms underpinning expert authority. These include scientific rationality, objective disinterest, rule-following, and argumentative transparency (Nichols, 2017). As a result, the core technical, administrative, and organizational capacities of modern state institutions and other societal agencies to govern their societies are called into question because they can no longer trust ‘the experts’ to deliver the objective knowledge and epistemological consensus on which effective governmental intervention depends (Callison & Manfredi, 2020). Equally, experts cannot maintain the public trust and confidence on which they rely for their legitimacy and viability against a rising tide of criticism and scepticism to which it has been subjected (Guilluy, 2019). Thus, the social contract between experts, states, and publics breaks down.

The ‘legitimation crisis’ narrative is intellectually grounded in Habermas’s (1975, 1985) pessimistic analysis of a fundamental breakdown in the core normative structures and democratic processes through which the ‘discourse and practice of modernity’ have been sustained because they can no longer contain, much less resist, the irrational forces and power-driven dynamics which have come to dominate our lives. Enlightenment reason has

finally given way to ‘post-modern’ intellectual discourses and political practices in which the authoritarian ‘will-to-power’ subordinates any counter narratives to its dictates and absorbs them within its populist embrace (Leicht, 2016).

A complex conjuncture of interacting and escalating developments is identified to provide an explanatory account of this legitimisation crisis in expert authority and its denouement. Firstly, an incremental decay in the material and ideological support for expert authority from coalitions of dominant political, economic, and cultural elites increasingly under the sway of neo-liberal thinking and the normative ideal of a universal market society liberated from the ethical and regulative constraints promoted by ‘experts’. Examples of this include research into the challenges experts contend with in the face of delegitimation where Kirton and Guillame (2019) highlight how underpinned by neoliberal principles of privatisation and restructuring to ensure greater efficiency in service provision, the professional identity and functioning of UK probation services were severely undermined. The espoused efficiency was not realised and instead the privatisation and restructuring served to challenge the occupation’s values of serving the public good through its focus on encouraging rehabilitation and was considered by practitioners as an ideologically and politically motivated attack on them that, ‘...assaulted their sense of professionalism to the point of regarding their profession as all but ‘dead’.’ (Kirton and Guillame, 2019, p.930).

Secondly, repeated expert failure to predict and control economic, political, and social dislocations which fundamentally call into question the validity of their specialist knowledge/skill and related policies and programmes. This was seen acutely in response to the 2008 financial crash with questions raised as to the role of experts such as accounting and auditing to raise the alarm about financial institutions that were failing (e.g., Mueller et al.,

2015) thus undermining their institutional and ideological basis. Related to this, is also an increasing awareness of the extent to which expert groups consistently fail to live-up to their own ethical codes and standards and the widespread public disenchantment with their continued declarations of probity and fidelity which this generates (Guilluy, 2019; Koppl, 2018; Sandel, 2020; Streeck, 2016). For example, instances of professional misconduct, ‘...have severely challenged the view of the professions as inherently good and altruistic, as well as the governance and regulatory frameworks that are predicated on this understanding’ (Gabbioneta et al., 2019, p. 1709).

Thirdly, the emergent role of technology is also a driver of the breakdown in the social contract identified in this narrative. Critical analyses question technology’s neutral logic, demonstrating how it has material and human impacts, harmful and meaningful consequences, and far-reaching implications into a multitude of facets of society (Andrejevic, 2020; Mullaney, 2021). It is also accompanied by a technology industry operating in a neo-liberal context that takes little social accountability for its impact (Baccarella et al., 2018), leaving the public as test subjects for the social effects of the technology (Hicks, 2021), whether that be the use of social media to influence democratic elections as seen in the Cambridge Analytica scandal (Brown, 2020) or how the spread of COVID-19 misinformation affects people’s health protective behaviour (Allington et al., 2020). This maelstrom of rapid technological growth coupled with limited regulatory intervention, helps to fuel the breakdown in established institutional structures and democratic processes that were powerful in the last century reinforcing the de-legitimation of experts and expertise.

However, the key development given explanatory primacy in this narrative is the global ‘recrudescence of populism’ and the deep-seated and profound distrust and rejection of expert

authority which it is seen to entail (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2017). Both right-leaning (Fieschi, 2019) and left-leaning (Mouffe, 2018; Srnicek & Williams, 2015) populist movements remain deeply suspicious of institutionalized expert power and status because of its intimate association with unaccountable political elites and their innate proclivity to ‘betray the people’ in furtherance of their sectional interests and values (Müller, 2017). For example, Grey (2018) observes this was particularly brought to the fore in the rhetoric around the Brexit vote for the UK to leave the European Union, reframing experts amongst ‘the liberal elite’.

These populist movements are propelled by innovations in technology, and in particular communication technology and social media that provides platforms for populist elites and figureheads to espouse their views of experts as delegitimate features of democratic societies (Hicks, 2021). It allows for the proliferation of misinformation (Lemos et al., 2020) and/or disinformation (Dan et al. 2021; Gruzd et al., 2021), that can challenge the knowledge of experts (Hicks, 2021), and reaffirm biases of audiences (Zhou & Shen, 2021). For instance, Gustafsson & Weinryb (2019) highlight how engagement with social media activism prioritises an infatuation with the individual and their opinion which tends to align with these populist ideals and the potential to risk democratic procedures.

When neo-liberalism and populism come together to form a hybridized political ideology and discourse combining selected elements of market fundamentalism, authoritarian nationalism, and economic protectionism (Callison & Manfredi, 2020; Vormann & Weinman, 2021), then the threat to expert authority escalates to an even higher level. This is to the extent that experts now become ‘the enemy’ in the sense that they embody and exemplify the deep-seated corruption, venality and maleficence of governance regimes and state institutions that

have been captured by established political and administrative elites. A classic example would be the *Daily Mail* headline ‘Enemies of the People’ on 4<sup>th</sup> November 2016 featuring the faces of high court judges that ruled that the government would need to get parliamentary approval to exit the European Union.

Experts are seen to have provided ruling elites with the ideologies, discourses, and technologies through which the machinery of global reason and governance has been designed and legitimated (Forrester, 2019; Kennedy 2016). But, when viewed through an authoritarian populist ideological prism, this ‘strategic global architecture’ (Guillen, 2015) which experts have built now becomes the major obstacle to articulating and mobilizing the ‘popular will’ in furtherance of re-asserting national identity, cultural authenticity, and economic autarchy (Müller, 2017; Sandel, 2020). This was asserted by Donald Trump’s presidential campaign that revolves around a central paradox where, ‘Trump is simultaneously a product of processes such as globalization, financialization, deindustrialization and rising inequalities and a vocal protest against their effects on everyday lives of people...’ (Gills et al., 2018, p.298).

Consequently, these different factors combine in this delegitimation narrative to produce a somewhat apocalyptic vision of the ‘death of expertise’ which Nichols (2017, p. 5-6) describes as:

...fundamentally a rejection of science and dispassionate rationality which are the foundations of modern civilization. ... It is a sign of a polity filled with distrust of formal politics, chronically sceptical of authority and prey to superstition ....it is about the [collapsing] relationship between experts and citizens in a democracy.

In turn, the core ideological foundations and political architecture underpinning the social contract between experts, states, and publics is broken and with it, expert authority.

### *The Demystification Narrative*

While the de-legitimation narrative looks primarily, to exogenous changes in generating a legitimation crisis and institutional breakdown in expert authority, the demystification narrative focuses on the endogenous developments which have radically eroded any generalized belief in the objectivity and rationality of expert judgement and practice.

Therefore, at the core of this narrative is the notion that the social contract between experts, states, and publics has been undermined by experts' co-optation into systems of surveillance that de-mystify both their rationality and authority.

Those analysts supporting the demystification narrative draw on Foucault, to provide an analysis of expert power and control focused on 'the material operations, forms of subjugation, and the connections among the uses made of local systems of subjugation on the one hand, and the apparatuses of knowledge on the other' (Foucault, 2003, p. 34). This means there is a refocusing of analytical attention away from 'system level disintegration' and the institutional-level failures and breakdowns generating it (Streeck 2016), towards 'social level disintegration' and the localized 'systems of subjugation' through which it unfolds. Such an analytical refocussing entails sustained concentration on a wide range of disciplinary technologies, implemented at the 'organizational coalface', through which state-level, neo-liberal governance regimes are incrementally fabricated and reproduced, whether that be organizational culture or identity and policies or practices.

This analytical injunction has been taken up by the governmentality school of organizational research on the new modes of expertise emerging under advanced liberal regimes, as well as the complex ways in which they both express and reinforce the increasing fragmentation and dislocation of the modern democratic state in its neo-liberal form (Dean, 1999; Johnson, 1994; Miller & Rose, 2008). Consequently, neo-liberalism's significance lies in the 'saturating effect' (Brown, 2019, p.19-20) of its principles, as they come to govern every domain of existence and as they require new modes of governmentality and their supporting technologies ensuring that this 'reprogramming of liberalism' would take hold everywhere by subjugating everyday life to its dictates and demands. For the self, this results in "emphasising individuals as enterprising subjects seeking to maximise potential, value and satisfaction. The market is seen as an ideal arena where this pursuit takes place, allowing free and independent maximisation of utility" (Musílek et al., 2020, p. 515-6). This is realised in organizations through the likes of organizational values and teamworking (McKinlay & Taylor, 2014), management training (Reed & Thomas, 2020), and policy and governance practices (Ferlie & McGivern, 2014), that enshrine the principles of governing the individual from afar.

Within this more general development, expert-based, tactics and techniques of 'democratized' forms of power and control are seen to be targeted around the creation of resilient and rational 'neo-liberal subjects' within the workplace and wider society (Chandler & Reid, 2016; Streeck, 2016). Consequently, the role of the expert in all of this is no longer that of the 'master legislator' objectively administering to the never-ending needs and demands of the 'welfare subject'. Instead, experts become 'technocratic fixers' who help to provide the 'neo-liberal subject' with the relevant practical knowledge, skills and dexterity

which they require to negotiate and prosper, or at least survive, under the much more uncertain and disruptive conditions that neo-liberalization imposes (Peck, 2010; Peck & Theodore, 2015; Streeck, 2016). Consequently, the expert becomes a framer of policies and programmes, as well as constructing the knowledge systems and organizational technologies whereby they can be ‘rolled out’ by a streamlined, but more strategic, neo-liberal state apparatus through which free-market principles become ‘saturated’ across a potentially limitless range of organizational settings (Springer, 2016). For example, Hoff & Kuiper (2021) demonstrate how the professionalization project of nursing in Holland involves, ‘a reconceptualization of nursing expertise as a set of technical and decontextualized managerial competencies aimed at rationalizing the management of health’ (p. 44) and thus transferring the responsibility of health management from the state to the individual.

However, the exponential development of digital technologies and with it the growth in surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019) and the datafication of social life (Dencik, 2020) now also forms part of this narrative, where technocracy dominates (Sylvia & Andrejevic, 2016) and surveillance is increasingly automated, accompanied by the displacement of human judgement and social relations (Andrejevic, 2019, 2020). Consequently, as ‘technocratic fixers’, experts find themselves caught-up in new and innovative modes of governmentality in which centralized forms of bureaucratic management and organizational control are gradually displaced by more technically advanced, organizationally pervasive, and socially ubiquitous surveillance regimes (Kellogg et al., 2020; Visser, et al., 2018). The overall shift towards surveillance regimes based on more advanced technologies of information extraction, manipulation, and exploitation (Crawford, 2021) simultaneously enhances the power and status of those expert groups designing and operating them, whilst exposing experts to the very same detailed monitoring and control systems which such technologies



facilitate that often renders them part of the regime as well. For example, Allan, Faulconbridge & Thomas (2018) demonstrate how lawyers have been captured by financialized metrics combined with regular surveillance of performance according to these targets which demonstrate how, ‘...professional work and careers in financialized organizations have been fundamentally reconfigured by the disciplinary effects of financial technologies deployed’ (p. 113).

Equally, as experts become more tightly drawn into and closely identified with the technocratic governance regimes on which the contemporary neo-liberal state depends, the less objective, independent and authoritative their specialist knowledge and skills come to be regarded by the publics they are meant to serve (Heusinkveld et al., 2018; Leicht, 2016; Reed, 2018a). As their roles, identities and status becomes increasingly demystified by a wide range of scholarly and public examinations and critiques which reveal the very narrow range of, primarily corporate elite, interests and values that they serve, their image as ‘traditional intellectuals’ administering to the ‘common good’ is increasingly superseded by a counter image of their status as ‘organic intellectuals’ driven by the political and technical needs of ruling groups occupying dominant positions within the neo-liberal state (Davies, 2018; Scott, 2008). For instance, studies into the role of whistleblowing can highlight attempts to reassert expert authority for the public good rather than subjugation to the system (e.g., Kenny et al., 2018) by highlighting the elites’ interests that are really served by this work. Nevertheless, this research also demonstrates how these individuals are still rendered as ‘outcast’ once the whistle is blown (e.g., Carollo et al., 2019) and thus experts remain disciplined within the neo-liberal regime.

In this way, the more experts become deeply imbricated in and identified with the policies and programmes promoted by the neo-liberal state, the more they expose themselves to the escalating political fallout and cultural abnegation that comes with the inevitable failures and mistakes which accompany practical implementation of abstract policy agendas (Davies, 2020; Peck, 2010; Peck & Theodore, 2015; Wedel, 2011). The demystification narrative therefore foregrounds the impact of neo-liberal governmentality combined with developments to surveillance technology that subsumes expert authority into the regime, rendering it as merely an operational aspect within it. In turn, the interests of experts as aligned with the regime are ‘unveiled’ which serves to undermine the justificatory claims and political credibility of experts’ social contract with states and in particular publics.

### *The Decomposition Narrative*

The decomposition narrative offers an explanatory account of the progressive decay of expert authority analytically and empirically grounded in what it sees as the fundamental structural transformations that the division of expert labour has undergone in Anglo-American political economies since the 1970s (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001). It suggests that the structural coherence and ideological cogency of established experts have been put under severe pressure by the fragmenting and fracturing dynamic which has been at work within the division of expert labour (Brock, 2006).

The narrative calls attention to the ways in which the emerging power and status of ‘calculative experts’ (Mau, 2019, p. 117), or ‘corporate professionals’ (Reed, 2019) – who are ‘more closely aligned to the market and representing corporate services such as management consultancy, information management and advertising’ (Reed, 2018b, p. 222) – has

challenged and undermined the expert authority of established elite professional groups in ways that threaten their continuing structural dominance and ideological prestige (Heusinkveld et al., 2018). The number, role, influence, and power of ‘calculative experts/corporate professionals’ have increased and expanded under the plethora of neo-liberal policies, programmes and initiatives which have been promoted and implemented in the leading Anglo-American political economies in recent decades (Brooks, 2018; Brown, 2015; Davies, 2017; Malin, 2020; Spence et al., 2017; Wedel, 2011). In turn, this creates ‘new domains of colonization and competition’ (Heusinkveld et al., 2018) between different professional occupations and generating a much more structurally complex ecology of expert occupational groups. This proliferation and fragmentation of the division of expert labour and emergence of alternate proto professions, poses different relations of trust within the social contract between experts, publics, and states and leaves the received model of expert authority under question as it does not sufficiently capture how all forms of expertise operate in contemporary organizations.

For advocates of the decomposition narrative, the rise to dominance of platform capitalism (Steinberg, 2021) via social media, big data, and AI have also played a pivotal role in generating a much more complex division of expert labour (Johannessen, 2020; Susskind & Susskind, 2015). Although there is more than a hint of technological determinism about this body of work (Steinberg, 2021), it highlights the ‘upside’ of the ‘fourth industrial revolution’ for experts where there is a continued increase in new roles available such as the emergence of data scientists (Avnoon, 2021; Dorschel, 2021), or digital consultants, algorithms developers, and platform engineers (Kellogg et al., 2020). It has also provided the opportunity for more orthodox experts to reconfigure their value and identity in relation to technological changes. For instance, Armour & Sako (2020) demonstrate how within the

legal profession the limits of AI over their work, particularly with client facing tasks, or the collection of relevant data, offers the potential for new business models in legal services beyond the traditional partnership mode.

Yet, a ‘downside’ is also apparent where experts can struggle to promote and contain the disruptive and dislocating impact of the fourth industrial revolution. Here, expert status may become increasingly tenuous, not to say precarious, as automation, robotization, big data, and AI threaten to erode these jobs and/or their security, work identity and organizational role (Johannessen, 2020; Susskind & Susskind, 2015). For example, Eriksson-Zetterquist et al.’s (2009) study of professional purchasers highlighted how the introduction of an e-business system threatened their professional identities and practices. The introduction of the new technology standardised the purchasers’ day-to-day work, removing the traditionally social and interactional aspects of the job, and diminished their roles and status within the organization. The research demonstrates: ‘...how technology, as a part of assemblages of technological artifacts, ideologies and managerial practices, strongly influences the jurisdiction and authority of professional communities’ (Eriksson-Zetterquist et al., 2009, p. 1165).

Nevertheless, the narrative also highlights various ways in which the orthodox model of expert/professional authority can, and has, adapted to the escalating pressures and tensions of this more complex professional ecology (e.g., Thomas & Hewitt, 2011). Various ‘adaptive strategies and tactics’ have therefore been a key area of focus, producing hybridized forms of expert/managerial/professional authority (e.g., Correia, 2017; Francis, 2020; Hodgson et al., 2015; Martin et al. 2020) much better suited to the broader shifts towards network-based forms of organizing (Burgoin & Harvey, 2018; Sturdy & Wright, 2011), in which market

competition and discipline become much more powerful levers of elite political control and managerial influence (Cross & Swart, 2020; Noordegraaf, 2015). However, it still leaves organizational theorists struggling to capture what now constitutes expert authority in this rapidly changing context. As a result, the social, political, and cultural consensus between the three core institutional actors of experts, publics, and states on which the social contract between them was traditionally constructed, can no longer be sustained.

### **From Rational to Reflexive Authority: Making Authority Real through Struggle**

In table 1 we summarise the core analytical features and explanatory logics of the three narratives of de-legitimation, demystification, and decomposition. Each narrative begins with the identification of key changes to the wider societal and institutional context in which expert authority is located and then proceeds to explicate the mechanisms through which the crisis in expert authority has been realised, as well as the impact this has on the outcomes which follow.

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Insert table 1 around here

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Each of the analytical narratives we have reviewed, in varying ways and to varying degrees, highlight a destabilization of ‘rational expert authority’ – that is, the justification of claims to expertise based on advanced specialized knowledge and technical skill derived from objective scientific understanding and judgement (Young & Muller, 2014) – through which expert power and control have been routinely legitimated. They also question the sustainability of the implicit social contract between experts, publics, and states that has

ideologically and politically supported the wider institutional context within which ‘rational expert authority’ has become embedded and accepted.

In addition, they identify an emergent process whereby experts begin to see the need to rebuild the trust and commitment they once enjoyed from the communities in which they are embedded, by moving away from the ‘epistemological exclusivity’ and ‘jurisdictional closure’ through which they previously secured their command and control over others. Experts come to share or pool their expertise with non-expert groups who need the knowledge only they can provide, and they also begin to question the ‘defensive protectionism’ through which they once justified their power and status (Noordegraaf, 2020).

This incremental, and often painful, shift towards negotiated trust, shared knowledge and joint management is anticipated in the concept of ‘reflexive authority’ so central to the theory of ‘reflexive modernization’ developed by Beck (1999), Giddens (2000), and Unger (2019). Beck and Giddens redefine ‘expert authority’ in their joint work with Lash (Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1994) on the theme of ‘reflexive modernization’ in relation to several interrelated structural and cultural changes transforming both the institutional structures within which this form of modernization is embedded and the organizational relations and practices through which it is expressed. These entail, respectively: the ‘de-monopolization of expertise’ and its opening-up to social, rather than occupational, standards of relevance and jurisdiction; the broadening of decision-making processes to ensure that their outcomes are much more acceptable to actual and potential stakeholders; continual renegotiation and public dialogue between experts and non-experts; and, finally, an acceptance that decision-making arenas and networks must be open to multiple stakeholders and jurisdictions.

Underlying this analysis of the emergence of ‘reflexive modernization’ lies the reality of a multiple, biological, ecological, and political, risk society which deepens our dependence, individually and collectively, on experts, while simultaneously extending, displacing and stretching the range of ‘expert systems’ through which that dependency is propitiated in various ways. Under the conditions prevailing in ‘reflexive modernization’, pluralistic domains of expertise are opened-up in which ‘authority’ becomes more contested, situational, and transactional in ways that cut-across jurisdictional boundaries and the administrative hierarchies through which they have been bureaucratically policed and protected. As it becomes more mobile, detached and decentred, self-reflexive expertise - and the plurality of mechanisms through which it is legitimated - generates ‘a world of multiple authorities’ (Beck et al., 1994, p. 91). These vie for our attention and support in a way that makes expert knowledge, ‘open to re-appropriation by anyone with the necessary time and resources to become trained...there is a continuous filter-back of expert theories, concepts and findings to the lay population’ (Beck et al., 1994, p. 91).

As Hoogenboom and Ossewarde (2005, p. 612) argue, this conception of reflexive authority is developed by Beck and Giddens as a response to the belief that ‘late modern society is a society in a continuous legitimation crisis’ *because its core institutions and organizations can no longer lay claim to representing objective, rational knowledge in an exclusive and defensive manner*. They have become badly tainted, if not corrupted, by repeatedly failing to meet their own exacting normative standards and by the increasing ideological and political potency of counter rationalities, such as neoliberalism and populism, rejecting scientific knowledge as the exemplar of ‘rationality in action’ (Crouch, 2016; Davies, 2020).

Under the conditions of extreme decision-making uncertainty and high-risk environments prevailing under late modernity, rational-legal authority can no longer provide a viable institutional mechanism for legitimating expert power and control. Instead, a much more reflexive form of authority, grounded ‘in the belief in the ability of institutions and actors to negotiate, reconcile and represent arguments, interests, identities and abilities’ (Hoogenboom & Ossenwarde, 2002, p.614), emerges in order to provide expert groups and organizations with a justification for their key role in brokering and guiding the negotiating process through which decision-making rules and outcomes are continuously reviewed and reassessed. This emerging demand for a reflexive form of authority – as the normative basis for legitimating the much more limited, contextual, and accessible expert power and control prevailing under late modernity – becomes much more pressing, Unger (2019) insists, within a ‘knowledge economy’.

This reawakening theoretical and practical interest in reflexive, rather than rational, expert authority provides a useful corrective to the more apocalyptic and pessimistic prognoses of the decimation of expert authority under the combined pressures of neo-liberalization, populism, and technological rationalization. Its overriding emphasis on ‘active trust’, ‘knowledge contestation’, and ‘political embeddedness’ theoretically and empirically dovetails with the ‘dialogic’ or ‘dialectical’ model of scientific expertise which has emerged in recent years out of diverse fields such as science and technology studies (Collins et al. 2020; Eyal, 2019; Oreskes 2019; Young & Muller, 2014), the sociology of the professions (Burns, 2019; Saks, 2021), and international relations (Kennedy, 2016; Zürn, 2017).

Within this conception of reflexive expert authority, the need to build and sustain ‘active trust’ is much more tendentious and contentious than anything envisaged under the



established model of rational expert authority. The shift from rational/passive trust to active/reflexive trust is grounded in processes of ‘transformative interrogation’ embedded within ‘agnostic fields’ of specialization through which ‘novel solutions to problems are developed, accepted, and sustained as *facts*’ (Oreskes, 2019, p. 247-8).<sup>1</sup>

Thus, contestation within and between communities of expert groups and organizations, and with the communities and clients which they serve (including ‘the state’), over fundamental principles and operational protocols is now regarded *as a necessary precondition for, rather than as an insurmountable obstacle to*, the production and maintenance of ‘active trust’. The knowledge and techniques thereby resulting from it are based on claims which have survived sustained interrogation and critical scrutiny. Oreskes (2019, p.248) summarizes the key features of this revised, reflexive model of expert/scientific authority:

The beauty of this picture is that we can now explain what might otherwise appear paradoxical: that scientific investigations produce both novelty and stability. New observations, ideas, interpretations, and attempts to reconcile competing claims introduce novelty; critical scrutiny leads to collective decisions about what obtains in the world and hence to stability of knowledge claims. This picture can also help us to appreciate the irony that what was once viewed as an attack on science – the articulation of its social character – provides the basis for the strongest defence we can make of it.

This revised, reflexive conceptualisation of expert authority – as essentially contested, diverse, open and flexible in the face of critical challenges to its claims and status – is entirely

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<sup>1</sup> Emphasis in the original

in keeping with Beck's analysis of the 'risk society' (1992, 1999). Beck envisages a society based on specialized knowledge, information proliferation and risk management in which experts unavoidably generate 'manufactured uncertainties' in the very act of going about their business of identifying, gauging and mediating the threats which we face. In his view, as they open-up, explore, colonize and contest new spheres and domains of social action, experts unintendedly generate innovative forms of risk in the very process of developing, codifying and applying the specialized knowledge and techniques they deem necessary to mitigate and manage known risks and threats to our everyday organizational and institutional lives (Tooze, 2020).

Viewed through this analytical prism, *the crisis in expert authority is a precondition for expert existence*. Although it may vary in scale, intensity and ferocity expert authority will necessarily be subject to recurring crises due to the reality that it is both a cause and consequence of a form of social life in which escalating levels of uncertainty and risk are 'baked in'. As Eyal (2019) suggests, we are dealing with a 'continuing crisis' which is recursive, systemic and prolonged in both its underlying dynamics and the emergent mechanisms through which we attempt to manage their disruptive and dislocating consequences. To understand the 'crisis in expert authority' we need to reject linear modes of analysis in favour of more dialectical modes 'sensitive to contradictions and tensions, to combined action of opposing forces and their unintended consequences as they pull once this way, then push the other' (Eyal, 2019, p.83).

This 'dialectical/cyclical' mode of analysis is more likely to lead us on to ways of dealing with crises, such as climate change or the pandemic, with 'a strange mixture of fear and calculation' (Tooze, 2020) in which expert groups and organizations contend to establish the

legitimacy of their knowledge claims and interventions in the eyes of an increasingly fearful, but often cynical, public audience (Bothwell, 2020). Active trust building, and the enhanced legitimacy flowing from it, are now viewed as a recursive process in which scrutiny, transparency and advocacy are central to our understanding of how ‘expert authority’ is generated, reproduced and transformed in a world where radical uncertainty and contingency are the sine qua non of contemporary social and organizational life. As Turner (2001, p.145-6) observes, ‘that people are persuaded of claims of expertise through mutable, shifting conventions does not make the decisions to accept or reject the authority of experts less than reasonable...To grant a role to expert knowledge does not require us to accept the immaculate conception of expertise.’

### **Reflexive Expert Authority and Contemporary Governance**

Our previous analysis indicates that the contested transition to reflexive expert authority can be seen as a collective response to a dynamic situation in which power has shifted away from experts towards publics and states. Experts can no longer rely on ‘passive’ or ‘natural’ trust and deference from publics and states who are now much more intrusive and demanding in what they want from ‘their experts’ who are increasingly in a position of being ‘on tap’ rather than ‘on top’.

Governance, broadly speaking, can be understood ‘both as a political practice and as an institutional form that simultaneously possesses a face-to-face social immediacy and a more remote organizational abstractedness’ (Ezzamel & Reed, 2009, p.599). In many ways, it is the abstractedness and remoteness of conventional forms of expert authority which have been the major targets for its critics. This has been the case whether ‘from below’ in the name of ‘the

people' who are locked out of any meaningful participation in the everyday 'conduct of government' or 'from above' by governing elites acting in the name of 'individual freedom and choice' only made possible through the unrestrained imposition of market competition.

As a reaction to the growing clamour for 'people power' or for 'individual choice', contemporary governance structures have become more hybridized and extended as they strive to become more inclusive, flexible, and responsive to a much wider range of values, interests, and demands than established bureaucratic systems can ever hope to recognize much less accommodate. Over a decade ago, Crouch (2005) identified a long-term trajectory in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century driving towards 'recombinant governance structures and systems' whereby 'institutional entrepreneurs' innovatively recombined selected elements of market-based, hierarchy-based and stakeholder-based mechanisms of governing in order to maximize the political support needed to realize transformational socio-technical change.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century transition to a more reflexive form of expert authority builds on this growing demand for the development of a mode of institutional and organizational governance prioritizing transparency and accountability over stability and control. As the implicit social contract legitimating 'elite club government' came under sustained pressure from the late-20<sup>th</sup> century 'innovating and hybridizing dynamic' which Crouch (2005, 2013) and others (Moran 2007) highlight, so the emergence of reflexive expert authority is likely to generate demands for more reflexive governance regimes. Necessarily, therefore, the rationale, design and operation of these reflexive governance regimes are likely to be inherently more openly contested, precarious and prone to recurring crises in which experts will play an even more strategic role in interpreting them and advising on how they are to be managed. As Spector (2019, p. xv) argues, 'a crisis is not a thing to be managed, *not* an objective threat to be

responded to with a special form of heroic leadership. Crisis, rather, is a claim awaiting critical appraisal'. He further maintains that these claims, requiring urgent and drastic attention on the part of governing elites and agencies, will become discursively embedded in 'crisis narratives' in which complex coalitions of political leaders, expert advisors, corporate executives and party representatives will come together and fight it out to frame and control the dominant story.

Consequently, reflexive governance will be a highly 'political process' geared to the identification and management of escalating risks and crises. But at a time when 'hazards themselves sweep away the attempts of institutional elites and experts to control them' (Beck 1999, p.150), the innate capacity of experts to protect us from the threats they pose may again be subject to increasing levels of public scrutiny and scepticism. Also, we should not underestimate the 'push-back' from ruling elites, and those experts who advise and support them, to pressures for more open and accountable modes of governance in crisis situations when their political capital, reputation, and authority is almost certainly 'on the line' (Mann 2021). The temptation to retreat into old ways of closed, secretive, and remote modes of governance should not be underestimated (Calvert & Arbuthnott, 2021; Tooze, 2021).

Expert life at the organizational coalface under reflexive governance will be fundamentally different from that under rational governance. Even in relation to elite expert groups, such as doctors, accountants, and lawyers, their status as authoritative figures able to rely on the social and moral capital which their formal, hierarchical positions automatically accrue gives way to something much more tendentious and precarious – subject to the need for ongoing renegotiation and renewal. Their legitimacy as elite and remote 'legislators' is superseded by their emergent role as 'brokers', 'fixers', and 'facilitators' in which 'active trust' is won and

lost in the emotionally charged and ideologically driven arena of organizational politics and the multiple stakeholder interests and values that it necessarily entails (Allan et al., 2018; Burns 2019; Saks, 2021).

This transformation in the organizational life of experts under reflexive governance exposes them to subversion, resistance, and opposition from other groups and factions because their hierarchical authority and the ‘passive trust’ on which its legitimacy rested, have been weakened and diluted by the multiple changes identified in the three narratives previously discussed. Yet, expert existence under reflexive governance also offers experts the opportunity to remake their authority anew by responding appropriately to challenging conditions under which its legitimacy becomes more tensile and agile due to the very fact that it has successfully worked its way through the political ‘huh bub’ of contemporary organizational life. The ‘good old days’ of expert hegemony may be over, but this doesn’t mean to say that expert authority cannot be remade and renewed in ways that make it better suited for life in the ‘risk society’ and the reflexive modes of governing and organizing on which it will have to depend.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have sought to identify and assess the conditions of, and prospects for, expert authority in contemporary societies. We show the various ways in which rational expert authority has been challenged and the resulting transformation of the social contract between experts, publics, and states that has ensued. In turn, we highlight reflexive expert authority as the emerging conceptualisation that can more adequately reflect how authority can now be conceived, legitimated, and maintained for experts going forward. The implications this

entails for more reflexive governance has also been assessed because it is necessitated on account of the changing dynamic in the social contract that underpins expert authority, perceived in different ways by the three narratives we outline.

The analysis we develop in this paper strongly indicates *that the ongoing crisis in expert authority is a process rather than a terminus*. We are living through a particularly intense phase within this process when much of the pre-existing institutional and organizational architecture within which expert work was legitimated and embedded is unlikely to survive in anything like its established form. However, ongoing struggles over how expert work is authorized and what ‘we’ can expect ‘it’ to deliver will have fateful consequences for the quality of our organizational lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Political and institutional space has opened-up in which reflexive forms of expert authority and governance have a realistic chance to establish themselves. We see the concept of reflexive expert authority and governance having the potential to transform the way in which we think about and enact organizational decision making across the public and private sectors. In broad terms, we see it as providing key organizational mechanisms and practices ‘democratizing’ expert knowledge and the ways in which it informs collective action in three interrelated respects.

First, it moves us away from the ‘exclusionary epistemology’ on which the rational model of expert authority and governance rests by promoting an ‘inclusionary epistemology’ breaking down institutional and cognitive barriers between experts and non-experts of both a formal and informal kind. Second, it maintains that the ‘jurisdictional closure’ on which the rational model depends is superseded by ‘jurisdictional consensus’ in which much wider stakeholder

involvement and civic participation encourages the strengthening of more collective, collaborative, and coproduced modes of knowledge production and application. Third, it promotes more embedded and contextualized forms of management and regulation rejecting the logic of autonomous self-management and regulation dominant under the rational model and replacing it with conventions and rules giving a greatly extended role to external, community-based scrutiny and evaluation.

Taken as an integrated package of reforms, a move to reflexive expert authority and regulation directly challenges the intellectual and political dominance of elite decision-making theories and practices in both public and private sector organizations in which powerful and remote elites are legitimately allowed to hide behind legalistic and formalistic governance structures and regulative systems. Their reliance on a formulaic ‘risk calculi’ based on ostensibly objective and universal ‘efficiency and effectiveness criteria’ to camouflage the vested interests and ideological values which they protect, now becomes subjected to a much wider set of deliberative practices geared to interrogating their integrity and efficacy with much greater urgency and impact.

In turn, this move to reflexive expert authority and governance is likely to be somewhat disconcerting, to say the least, for established power elites as it forces them to engage with demands for more open and participative decision-making forums in which experts can no longer be relied upon to do their bidding. It also moves us on from ‘blind or passive trust’ in expert authority towards a more mature and proactive trust relationship based on wider epistemic and social criteria grounded in mutual respect between different ‘epistemic communities’ working across a range of jurisdictional domains. In this way, both organizational/corporate elites and experts must recognize that their exclusive monopoly



control over advanced specialist knowledge has been broken by the changes identified in this paper and come to terms with the potential they can now offer for renewing the social contract between them and the communities in which they are embedded. By moving us closer towards forms of organizational decision making in which wider civic participation is positively encouraged, reflexive modes of governing will push organizational elites and their managerial representatives much harder to build long term trust relationships through ongoing socio-political processes in which legitimacy must be proactively renewed rather than passively reproduced.

Therefore, in its design and operation, reflexive governing and organizing is an inherently complex and unstable way to conduct government. It necessarily entails a delicate and precarious balancing act between strategic direction and devolved empowerment if it is to come anywhere near to realizing the theoretical ideals of ‘deliberative’ (Elster, 1998) or ‘communitarian’ (Collier, 2018; Hirst, 1993) democracy on which it philosophically rests. This contextual transformation calls for a revitalized conception of expert authority, theoretically and practically equipped to deal with the deeply rooted public mistrust, concerns, and instabilities evident today and with the ever-present possibility of a revivification of even more authoritarian and exclusionary modes of governing and organizing. This call might be seen as a key element with a wider political and ethical movement to negotiate a new, more inclusive, and generous social contract fully recognizing and resourcing shared risks, interdependencies, and protections leading to a revitalization of civil society (Shafik, 2021).

Consequently, it is important to identify and analyse these changes in the conceptualisation of expert authority and governance because they indicate fundamental alterations to organizing

that pose both opportunities and challenges to the groups within the social contract expert authority operates, and with it, to societies and democracies that rely on that social contract to operate. This paper, therefore, presents organizational researchers with an exciting and challenging future research agenda focused on better understanding and explaining how reflexive governing and organizing - and the much more participatory and unstable forms of expert authority on which they must rely - can be sustained and extended. This becomes especially pressing when the public distrust of 'experts' runs so deep and unaccountable corporate elite power still seems so entrenched, if not as unchallengeable as it was under earlier phases of neo-liberalization.

Emerging organizational forms such as people's assemblies over the climate crisis, or community organizing bodies (e.g., Citizens UK) on a range of issues, or regional and local municipalities interventions to revive and manage their economies seem to embody the principles and practices of reflexive modes of governing and organizing in which the role and legitimation of expertise is inclusionary and contested. But they must contend with unaccountable concentrations of elite corporate power and the shadow elite of corporate experts on which they can draw on to hide, obscure, and defend their interests more characteristic of a 'new feudalism' rather than of 'reflexive modernization' (Kotkin, 2020).

Indeed, the potential role which organizational researchers can play in giving us a better understanding of the social and political struggles through which civil society might be revitalized, and the very different basis on which expertise might be legitimated within such a society, emerges as a key implication of our analysis. This too has implications for organizational theorizing, not only around the notion of expertise, but also the likes of power, control, authority, and knowledge, which are at the heart of most critical theorizing around

organizations and organizational life, where greater consideration needs to be given to the dynamics between different stakeholders within and around organizations to legitimate and ‘make real’ these ideas.

As Kennedy (2016, p. 106) reminds us, expertise is only ‘made real as authority through struggle’. Those struggles have been the central focus for this paper. They are likely to remain at the intellectual core of organization theory as its practitioners struggle to analyse the new dynamics of trust and control driving the emergence of innovative forms of governing and organizing in ‘troubled times’ when the temptation to fall back on regressive modes of power and legitimation is never far away. Yet, the analysis provided here strongly indicates that there is no going back to forms of expert authority - and the overarching modes of governing and organizing in which they were embedded - that depend on exclusion and closure for their legitimacy and viability. Events have moved too far for such a return to the ‘old normal’ to be feasible but other possibilities have emerged which offer a real opportunity for very different forms of expert authority to be sustainable in very different times. Our role as organization theorists is to understand these new dynamics of trust and control and how they may be ‘*remaking* expert authority real through struggle’.

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**Table 1: Summary of Three Narratives of Expert Authority in Crisis**

Narrative	Changes	Mechanisms	Outcomes
<b>De-legitimation</b>	System-wide breakdown in abstract trust systems	Generalised disbelief in expert objectivity and neutrality	Collapsing of institutional relationship between experts and citizens
<b>Demystification</b>	Disengaged and remote modes of neo-liberal governmentality	Ubiquitous surveillance regimes promoting and undermining expert power	Experts as technical functionaries
<b>Decomposition</b>	Fragmenting and fracturing dynamic within division of expert labour	Escalating jurisdictional conflicts between expert groups	Hybrid forms of expert authority better adapted to new expert ecologies