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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 21st century. This paper identifies and assesses three different narratives concerning the crisis in expert authority. These constitute the *delegitimation 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 future potency and stability of the concept of expert authority. 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. Furthermore, in developing the notion of reflexive expert authority, we contend that theorization of expert authority needs to privilege the deeper dynamics of trust and control at the core of its analytical focus within organization theory.

Keywords

experts, reflexive authority, legitimacy, governance, power, control

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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 21st century societies is one of the key themes defining contemporary sociopolitical 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, or control that 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 that has been gathering momentum over the last decade or so seem 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 that have the potential to undermine whatever residual communal belief remains in the collective capacity of experts to solve "our problems" in ways that preserve sociopolitical 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 that 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 center 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 that 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 that 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 programs, who are increasingly skeptical about the returns that the social contract delivers to the state. This in turn directly reinforces growing disenchantment among 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" that ideologically and politically defines 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 neoliberalization, 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 *delegitimation*, which highlights institutional breakdown in trust and confidence in expert authority; *demystification*, which prioritizes neoliberal governmentality that has rendered expert authority as merely a technocratic fixer of the neoliberal regime; and *decomposition*, which foregrounds the increasingly heterogeneous and fragmented landscape of expert labor 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 while 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 that 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, challenges the received model of expert authority at a time when the expert division of labor is itself undergoing root-and-branch overhaul and destabilization. The more reflexive conceptualization 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 elucidate the concept *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 21st 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 conceptualized going forward.

The delegitimation 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 neoliberal-driven and global 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 skepticism to which they have been subjected (Guilluy, 2019). Thus, the social contract between experts, publics, and states 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 that 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 legitimation crisis in expert authority and its denouement. First, an incremental decay in the material and ideological support for expert authority from coalitions of dominant political, economic, and cultural elites who are increasingly under the sway of neoliberal 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 Guillaume (2019) highlight how, underpinned by neoliberal principles of privatization 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 realized and, instead, the privatization 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 & Guillaume, 2019, p. 930).

Second, the repeated expert failure to predict and control economic, political, and social dislocations, which fundamentally calls into question the validity of their specialist knowledge/skill and related policies and programs. This was seen acutely in response to the 2008 financial crash, with questions raised as to the role of experts (e.g., in accounting and auditing) in raising 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 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 that 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).

Third, 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 for a multitude of facets of society (Andrejevic, 2020; Mullaney, 2021). This is accompanied by a technology industry operating in a neoliberal context that takes little social accountability for its impact (Baccarella et al., 2018), leaving the public to be test subjects for the social effects of 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 affected people's health protective behavior (Allington et al., 2021) . This maelstrom of rapid technological growth, coupled with limited regulatory intervention, has helped to fuel the breakdown in established institutional structures and democratic processes that were powerful in the last century, reinforcing the delegitimation of experts and expertise.

However, the key development that is given explanatory primacy in this narrative is the global "recrudescence of populism" and the deep-seated and profound distrust and rejection of expert authority that 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 among "the liberal elite."

These populist movements are propelled by innovations in technology, in particular communication technology and social media that provide platforms for populist elites and figureheads to espouse their views of experts as delegitimate features of democratic societies (Hicks, 2021). This allows for the proliferation of misinformation (Lemos et al., 2021) 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, 2022). For instance, Gustafsson and Weinryb (2020) highlight how engagement with social media activism prioritizes an infatuation with the individual and their opinion, which tends to align with these populist ideals and thus poses a potential risk to democratic procedures.

When neoliberalism 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 November, 2016, featuring the faces of high court judges who 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) that experts have built now becomes the major obstacle to articulating and mobilizing the "popular will" in furtherance of reasserting national identity, cultural authenticity, and economic autarchy (Müller, 2017; Sandel, 2020). This was asserted by Donald Trump's presidential campaign, which revolved 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., 2019, 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, pp. 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 "skeptical 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, publics, and states is broken and with it, expert authority.

The demystification narrative

While the delegitimation narrative looks primarily to exogenous changes in generating the legitimation crisis and institutional breakdown in expert authority, the demystification narrative focuses on the endogenous developments that have radically eroded any generalized belief in the objectivity and rationality of expert judgment and practice. Therefore, at the core of this narrative is the notion that the social contract between experts, publics, and states has been undermined by experts' co-optation into systems of surveillance that demystify 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), toward social-level disintegration and the localized systems of subjugation through which it unfolds. Such an analytical refocusing entails sustained concentration on a wide range of disciplinary technologies, implemented at the "organizational coalface," through which state-level, neoliberal governance regimes are incrementally fabricated and reproduced, whether that be organizational culture or identity, 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 neoliberal form (Dean, 1999; Johnson, 1994; Miller & Rose, 2008). Consequently, neoliberalism's significance lies in the "saturating effect" (Brown, 2019, pp. 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, pp. 515–516). This is realized in organizations through the likes of organizational values and teamworking (McKinlay & Taylor, 2014), management training (Reed & Thomas, 2021) , 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 neoliberal 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 neoliberal subject with the relevant practical knowledge, skills, and dexterity they require to negotiate and prosper, or at least survive, under the much more uncertain and disruptive conditions that neoliberalization imposes (Peck, 2010; Peck & Theodore, 2015; Streeck, 2016). Consequently, the expert becomes a framer of policies and programs, as well as constructing the knowledge systems and organizational technologies whereby they can be rolled out by a streamlined, but more strategic, neoliberal state apparatus through which free-market principles become saturated across a potentially limitless range of organizational settings (Springer, 2016). For example, Hoff and Kuiper (2021) demonstrate how a professionalization project of nursing in the Netherlands 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 transfers 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 judgment 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 toward 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, while exposing experts to the very same detailed monitoring and control systems that such technologies facilitate that often also render them part of the regime. For example, Allan et al. (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 neoliberal 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, 2018b). As their roles, identities, and status become increasingly demystified by a wide range of scholarly and public examinations and critiques that reveal the very narrow range of, primarily corporate elite, interests and values 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 neoliberal 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 "outcast" once the whistle is blown (e.g., Carollo et al., 2019), and thus experts remain disciplined within the neoliberal regime.

In this way, the more experts become deeply imbricated in and identified with the policies and programs promoted by the neoliberal state, the more they expose themselves to the escalating political fallout and cultural abnegation that come with the inevitable failures and mistakes that accompany practical implementation of abstract policy agendas (Davies, 2020; Peck, 2010; Peck & Theodore, 2015; Wedel, 2011). The demystification narrative therefore foregrounds the impact of neoliberal governmentality, combined with developments to surveillance technology, that subsume expert authority into the regime, This renders expert authority as merely an operational aspect within the regime. In turn, the interests of experts as being aligned with the regime are "unveiled," which serves to undermine the justificatory claims and political credibility of the 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, which is analytically and empirically grounded in what it sees as the fundamental structural transformations that the division of expert labor 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 that has been at work within the division of expert labor (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, 2018a, p. 222)—have 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 neoliberal policies, programs, and initiatives that 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 generates a

much more structurally complex ecology of expert occupational groups. This proliferation and fragmentation of the division of expert labor, and the emergence of alternate proto-professions, pose 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, 2022) via social media, big data, and artificial intelligence (AI) have also played a pivotal role in generating a much more complex division of expert labor (Johannessen, 2020; Susskind & Susskind, 2015). Although there is more than a hint of technological determinism about this body of work (Steinberg, 2022), 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), digital consultants, algorithm 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 and 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, offer 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 standardized 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 key areas 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 toward 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, 2021; Noordegraaf, 2015). However, this 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 summarize the core analytical features and explanatory logics of the three narratives of delegitimation, demystification, and decomposition. Each narrative begins with the identification of key changes to the wider

Table 1. Summary of Three Narratives of Expert Authority in Crisis.

Narrative	Changes	Mechanisms	Outcomes
Delegitimation	Systemwide breakdown in abstract trust systems	Generalized disbelief in expert objectivity and neutrality	Collapsing of institutional relationship between experts and citizens
Demystification	Disengaged and remote modes of neoliberal governmentality	Ubiquitous surveillance regimes promoting and undermining expert power	Experts as technical functionaries
Decomposition	Fragmenting and fracturing dynamic within division of expert labor	Escalating jurisdictional conflicts between expert groups	Hybrid forms of expert authority better adapted to new expert ecologies

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 realized, as well as the potential outcomes these narratives pose for expert authority.

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 judgment (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 toward negotiated trust, shared knowledge, and joint management is anticipated in the concept of *reflexive authority* that is 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 et al., 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 "demonopolization 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 that 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 the jurisdictional boundaries and 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 Ossewaarde (2005, p. 612) argue, this conception of reflexive authority is developed by Beck et al. (1994) 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 & Ossewaarde, 2002, p. 614), emerges 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 neoliberalization, 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 that 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, pp. 247–248).

Thus, contestation within and between communities of expert groups and organizations, and with the communities and clients that 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 that 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 conceptualization of expert authority—as essentially contested, diverse, open, and flexible in the face of critical challenges to its claims and status—is entirely in keeping with Beck's (1992, 1999) analysis of the *risk society*. 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 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" that is recursive, systemic, and prolonged in both its underlying dynamics and the emergent mechanisms through which we attempt to manage the disruptive and dislocating consequences. To understand the crisis in expert authority we need to reject linear modes of analysis in favor of more dialectical modes that are "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 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, pp. 145–146) 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 toward 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, 2008, p. 599) . In many ways, it is the abstractedness and remoteness of conventional forms of expert authority that 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 clamor 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 20th century driving toward "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 sociotechnical change.

The 21st-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 that prioritizes transparency and accountability over stability and control. As the implicit social contract legitimating elite club government came under sustained pressure from the late-20th 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 advisers, 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 skepticism. Furthermore, we should not underestimate the pushback 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 that 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 this 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 by responding appropriately to the 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 "hubbub" of contemporary organizational life. The "good old days" of expert hegemony may be over, but this does not 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 have shown 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 have highlighted reflexive expert authority as the emerging conceptualization that can more adequately reflect how authority might now be conceived, legitimated, and maintained for experts going forward. The implications this entails for more reflexive governance have also been assessed because this 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 have outlined.

The analysis we have developed 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 preexisting 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 21st 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 that can democratize 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 encourage the strengthening of more collective, collaborative, and co-produced 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 that was 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. The reliance of these elite decision-making theories and practices on a formulaic risk calculi based on ostensibly objective and universal efficiency and effectiveness criteria to camouflage the vested interests and ideological values that 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 for established power elites, to say the least, 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 toward 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 of 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 toward 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 sociopolitical 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 of conducting government. It necessitates 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 that is 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 within 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 analyze these changes in the conceptualization 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 that expert authority operates, and with it, to the 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 neoliberalization.

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 corporate experts, on which they can draw to hide, obscure, and defend their interests—more characteristic of a "new feudalism" than of reflexive modernization (Kotkin, 2020).

Indeed, the potential role that 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 of this paper. They are likely to remain at the intellectual core of organization theory as its practitioners struggle to analyze 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 that 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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