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## The crisis in Expert Authority and the challenges for the future of academia

Based on: *Enough Of Experts: Expert Authority in Crisis*, Cara Reed and Michael Reed. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2023. 232p. Hardcover. ISBN 9783110739053.

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Cara Reed and Michael Reed's *Enough of Experts: Expert Authority in Crisis* examines the growing challenge to expert authority, shedding light on one of the most pressing issues of our day and age. This review contextualises their research, highlight key contributions, and summarises the three narratives developed to comprehend the challenges to expert authority. Lastly, we argue that Reed and Reed's (2023) analysis offers insights into the distrust in scientific research and the evolving role of academia.

Challenges to expert authority are not new. In many ways, climate denial discourses questioning the scientific consensus of anthropogenic climate change have embraced a *fake experts'* strategy and narrative as a key element of its misinformation campaigns since the 1980s (Washington and Cook, 2011). More recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, even States have rejected expert and scientist recommendations in favour of an ideological *laissez-faire* approach that prioritised economic interests (Bourgeron, 2022). Those debates have ignored and publicly ridiculed expert voices (Spillane and Jouillé, 2023), distancing from the belief that 'experts know the best' (Riaz et al., 2011). But how the appeal to experts is being reframed to use them as a mediation tool between governing elites and the public remained underexplored, and that is what Cara Reed and Mike Reed uncover in their book.

During the last decade, the challenge to expert authority has been associated with the consolidation of far-right populist discourses undermining scientific expertise. The rise and normalisation of far-right populist movements and discourses, as well as their subsequent consolidation into election victories (Mudde, 2019), have shaken governance dynamics and challenged the role of experts (Gomes and Böhm, 2023). These recent developments have eroded the public trust in scientific knowledge and higher education even further (Thorp, 2024).

Reed and Reed (2023) examine the crisis in expert authority, addressing gaps in the literature on how expert power and legitimacy are created, sustained and dismantled, which is often scant and not systematised in the literature. Providing a key contribution to this debate, the book unpacks three narratives that challenge the implicit social contract that has supported expert authority and legitimacy within governance systems. An introduction to these narratives is also available in a paper recently published by the authors (Reed and Reed, 2022).

The first narrative, ‘delegitimation’ (Chapter 2) emphasises the decline in public trust in expert legitimacy. In part, this distrust gained momentum following the 2008 financial crisis and the heightened neoliberal-driven austerity policies. This narrative connects with populist movements to critique institutionalised expert power and its perceived association with ‘elites’ that go against the ‘will of the people’. The second narrative, ‘demystification’ (Chapter 3) focuses on the erosion of expert objectivity due to experts’ co-optation into neoliberal governance and surveillance regimes that demystify experts ‘rationality and authority’. Experts were reduced to ‘technocratic fixers’ who provide the knowledge and skills that the neoliberal state requires. The consequence is that experts became exposed and associated with these policies and are now perceived as failures. Finally, the ‘decomposition’ narrative (Chapter 4) analyses the fragmentation of expertise due to technological advancements (e.g. social media, big data and artificial intelligence). The dominance of platform capitalism changed the division of expert labour in Western societies, creating new professions and hybrid forms of expert authority. This narrative illustrates how expert authority is decomposing and, at the same time, recomposing with self-adjustments to absorb threats and secure its survival.

In this timely and thought-provoking book, the authors further expand and develop key implications of the expert authority crisis, offering a case study analysing the narratives ‘in action’ during COVID-19 responses (Chapter 5). The delegitimation of expert authority is illustrated by countries led by populist right-wing politicians – like President Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and President Donald Trump in the United States, questioning the virus, and the vaccines, as well as

creating 'alternative narratives' across their media platforms. The demystification narrative is exemplified by the UK government, which used the science rhetoric to camouflage political decisions, such as bringing the country out of lockdown measures earlier than advised. Lastly, the decomposition narrative is characterised by the tension between medical and scientific professionals *versus* private companies in the implementation of trace systems, as well as divergences between different areas of expertise – revealing that 'science' is heterogeneous.

These intertwined narratives not only identify the challenges to experts but also expose how their social capital and moral authority have been impacted by neoliberalisation, authoritarian populism and technological rationalization. Here lies one of Reed and Reed's major contributions, which is the unpacking of the development of a contemporary crisis and its pervasive influence into the foreseeable future (Chapters 6, 7 and 8). As such, the book provides an apt examination of the future of experts and its long-lasting impact on governance regimes. In this sense, Reed and Reed (2023) bring important contributions not only to Management and Organisation Studies, but also to different academic fields and policy-oriented debates. Even though the book does not explicitly bring a 'call for action', it advances the understanding of how expert authority is dismantled, especially in a political context characterised by the rise of populist regimes.

Reflecting on the threads that experts will likely face in the near future – rejuvenated meritocracy, technopopulism, civic professionalism, and critical elitism (Chapter 7) – and the lack of institutional trust in their authority, the authors discuss the need to rebuild the social contract between states, public and experts (Chapter 8). The crisis in the expert authority does not mean the end of experts. In fact, it indicates how the knowledge and skills of experts remain indispensable to providing solutions and answers to wicked problems.

In this sense, the book encourages experts to adopt a reflective approach to their civic role and their work in policy-making governance. In a global context marked by uncertainties and conflicting values, experts must recognise they operate within political controversies (Grundmann, 2018). At the same time, they must remain true to themselves, acting in a position where they can question and challenge power elites, with their internal values and expertise (Reed and Reed, 2023).

These 'civic duties' and resilience, exercised by experts in times of crisis, can be unpacked in their different roles. In this sense, we argue that the 'expert crisis' detailed in the book is closer to home and academics should consider the role they play as scientific experts. For instance, how academics engage with the media and the public beyond the mediation of governing elites (if this is even possible)? How the profession deal with 'the demonization of expertise' as the outcome of the

decomposition narrative? Which teaching pedagogies could address the challenge to academic expertise?

These are questions that go beyond the scope of the book. However, the analysis offered in the book encouraged us to reflect on our role as experts. It might be time for our profession – academics – to seriously discuss the nature of the publication game and its impact on the ‘expert crisis’. Publications are often the end goal and the main emphasis on our career development, legitimacy and prestige within academic circles, leading to an emphasis on ‘academic productivism’ that can produce articles that are barely read (Prichard, 2013). In other words, academics often write papers as an end in and of itself. This is not a critique about the importance of academic publishing – which certainly gives legitimacy to the academic expertise and the science behind it, but it is about the ‘game’ and the political economy of journal publishing. Focusing on our role as experts on writing and creating dialogues among our professional peers and thinking that academics are contributing to social change (Parker, 2023), distances ourselves from the ‘world out there’. It is time to bring to the core of our profession what is the public value (Kitchener et al, 2023) of our research and the publishing strategies, connecting it with the challenges of our time.

Reed and Reed’s book is an insightful read that theorises on a pressing issue of our time. Despite focusing on different areas of expertise, the book inspired us, as academics, to reflect on how to engage with the policy-making governance, without being coopted by political interests and controversies that do not do justice to our work. In *Enough of Experts: Expert Authority in Crisis*, the authors conclude that our societies need to rethink the liberal and social democratic contract between states, the public and experts to address the challenges ahead. We would argue that this encompasses a discussion on the Civic Mission of our Universities and the public value of our research as a way to connect our institutions, profession and the local communities which are often neglected and ignored by the universities that surround them.

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