

POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND LAY EXPERTISE

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to criticize the elitist/aristocratic theory of political representation, according to which representation is designed to balance people's participation with the rule of an expert elite. However, an internal and an external criticism of this theory can be respectively developed that revolve around the notion of "lay expertise". Indeed, the article clarifies that this elitist theory goes hand in hand with a top-down understanding of expertise itself. This connection erroneously reinforces the opposition which is unjustifiably drawn between inclusion and expertise, closing the door to the culturally embedded inputs that lay-experts can provide (*internal criticism*). Moreover, the analysis shows that the elitist theory erroneously ignores a set of political dynamics defining political representation, thus reducing representation to an exclusionary device (*external criticism*). Lay expertise shows that representation has a wider political potential which, crucially, enables the possibility to mediate between different kinds of knowledge and interests.

KEYWORDS

Elitism, Political Representation, Representative Democracy, Democracy and Expertise, Social Epistemology

INTRODUCTION

Representative democracy is not doing well. In recent years, several authors have sought to diagnose the problems of a government system which, after the Second World War, seemed destined for an unstoppable rise¹. However, it would be unrealistic here to discuss all the existing theses on this issue. Much more modestly, the present analysis will focus on defining the precise understanding of political representation in the scholarship on democracy. I will refer to this conception by term "aristocratic theory" or, perhaps more appropriately, *elitist theory of representation*. According to this theory—which will be reconstructed in the first section—representation in democracy is aimed at selecting an elite of expert

¹ See, among others, Mounk (2018), Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), Sunstein (2018), Runciman (2018), Bartels (2023).

decision-makers (or, in any case, ones receptive toward the reasoning of experts), in such a way that the egalitarian and participatory thrust of democracy is balanced by the guarantee that power will remain in the hands of epistemically reliable and socially recognizable decision-makers². Elitism is presented as a guarantee of expertise, which in turn is understood as a necessary tool for good decision-making. Crucially, representation is seen to ensure the rule of expertise by empowering an elite. According to this scheme, representation thus serves to curb bottom-up participation on the part of citizens, operating as a filter and exclusion device.

This paper aims to criticize this understanding of political representation, which increases the existing pessimism about democracy's capacity to involve and engage the people in the resolution of "wicked" problems³. To this end, I will develop two counterarguments to the elitist theory of representation. Given the above-mentioned centrality of expertise, the notion of lay expertise will prove essential for the argumentation, as this concept makes it possible to problematize and contrast—both internally and externally—the elitist understanding of representation. In the central sections it will be argued that: 1) while democracy requires expertise, it is not appropriate to rely on elites alone [internal argument—second section]; 2) the understanding of representation as a device for excluding/filtering certain types of knowledge does not seem cogent: if anything, representation allows for mediation and the integration between different forms of knowledge [external argument—third section]. I distinguish between an "internal" and an "external" argument as the former criticizes the elitist theory of representation by accepting its background (about the role of experts in decision-making), while the latter develops its criticism by rejecting the theory's background (concerning the function of representatives).

1. THE ELITIST THEORY OF REPRESENTATION

This section aims to reconstruct the elitist (or aristocratic) theory of representation. As anticipated, several authors have not hesitated to point the finger at political representation, which in their eyes is guilty of holding back and, in the long run, distancing people from politics and public affairs. Van Reybrouck, for example, characterizes political representation as a mechanism to keep power in the hands of a restricted groups of citizens, who have the resources and the influence to stand as candidates and be elected (Van Reybrouck, 2016). According to Van Reybrouck, this system is choking democratic participation, which is increasingly weakened by citizens' apathy and disinterest. Equally critical is Landemore. In her view, the "electoral and elitist character of representative democracy runs deep" and

² The alleged reliability of the elitist decision-makers will be analyzed in greater detail in section 2.

³ Grundmann uses this term to describe a problem that "is multidimensional, has high degrees of uncertainties, and requires addressing value conflicts" (Grundmann, 2018, p. 10).

its institutional principles “fall short of being democratic” (Landemore, 2017, p. 54). Indeed, Landemore argues, representative democracy impedes effective participation, makes people less informed, and reduces the power of the represented to set the agenda (Landemore, 2017, p. 55). Likewise, Pearse disputes “the functionality of representative democratic infrastructure”, noting the low level of citizens involvement in public decision-making: “representative democracies are not fulfilling their basic conceptual promises” (Pearse, 2020, p. 572).

These critical remarks point us in the direction of the elitist understanding of representative government⁴. According to this theory, political representation’s *raison d’être* consists in safeguarding the accuracy of the decisions that democracy produces without diminishing the inclusion of the citizenry in that process. In this reading, representative democratic government is the result of a balance between the inclusion of all people in public decisions and trust in epistemic elites (who possess the means to understand public problems and elaborate satisfactory responses). A representative setting allows all citizens to have a say in public problems, enabling them to determine the political line and select the figures deputed to realize it. At the same time, representation ensures good political outcomes by putting competent decision-makers at the helm, that is by appointing an elite of “notables” to key political positions. Representative government “aristocratizes” democracy by enabling an elite to make decision-making efficient and reliable through their own qualities. Political representation thus seems to be an institutional device used to include the whole *demos* while, at the same time, empowering expert decision-makers with the competence to generate good political outcomes. This interpretation combines the participatory and inclusive side of democracy with the need to safeguard and promote expertise in a democratic framework in the name of democracy’s consequentialist dimension, that is, the democratic task of producing political decisions and, with them, social effects⁵. To conclude, political representation preserves an elitist aspect within the democratic

⁴ It is worth stressing a preliminary distinction. The elitist theory of representation should not be conflated with the elitist theory of democracy. The latter framework offers a more comprehensive understanding of democracy, emphasizing electoral competition between the elites and low citizen participation as the main traits of democratic systems. Supporters of this paradigm include Lippman (1922; 1925), Mosca (1939), Schumpeter (1950), and Lipset (1994). Even if such a doctrine endorses several conclusions of the elitist theory of representation, the latter concentrates on representation as a theoretical focal point for understanding (and defending) elitism as a political bulwark for democratic governments. On one hand, the elitist theory of democracy stands as more general perspective on democracy which incorporates other, more specific conclusions. On the other hand, the elitist theory of representation develops one of those conclusions concerning representation as democracy’s institutional element.

⁵ We will return to this aspect in the conclusion.

system, as it assigns the ownership of power to all but concentrates its exercise among the few⁶.

In what follows, the understanding of representation as an “elitist/aristocratic device” is further defined by discussing four examples of representation in democracy: elected figures in ancient Athens; sortitions and elections in Renaissance Florence; the representative government envisaged by James Madison; and the epistocratic theory.

The centrality of the common citizens and the weight of their amateurism was the identifying trait of the Greek polis. Indeed, inclusiveness immediately emerges as a prominent feature of Classical Athens. The citizens, as *hoi idiotai*, were the protagonists of the Athenian institutions: they were legally required to sit in the *Ecclesia* (where laws and treaties were voted) and were eligible to serve in key political institutions like the *Boule* (where the agenda for the discussion in the *Ecclesia* was established) or the *Popular Tribunal* (roughly corresponding to the judiciary). The need for reliable government experts, however, was already felt at that time. For this reason, Athenian democracy came to rely on a combination of direct democracy (in some cases through lots) and representative democracy (Sinclair, 1991; Hansen, 1987; Thorley, 1996; Robinson, 2011). Open assemblies and the drawing of lots made no distinction in terms of competence and guaranteed the maximum inclusion of every individual. The election of representatives, on the contrary, was a selection process based on the abilities and reputation of the candidates, who could be appointed to leading positions. Generals (*stratēgoi*), for example, were chosen by election. In this way, decisions related to warfare matters were placed in the hands of expert, talented and prestigious citizens. This represents an extremely significant element, considering that warfare was one of the most important objects of ancient political deliberation (Somin, 2009, p. 589). Manin clearly explains the function of representation in Athenian politics: “the Athenians reserved appointment by election for magistracies for which *competence* was judged vital. These included the generals and top military administrators from the fifth century onwards and the chief financial officials created or reformed in the fourth century. [...] The elective posts were also the most important ones: the conduct of war and the management of finance affected what happened to the city more than any other function” (Manin, 1997, p. 14, my emphasis). As we have seen, elitism is a guarantee of expertise, which in turn is understood as a necessary tool for good decision-making, and representation crucially ensures the rule of expertise by empowering an elite.

Manin outlines an identical reasoning on representative government in a very different political context: Renaissance Florence. In this case, the reference author is Francesco Guicciardini, who, in commenting on the city’s institutions, dwells on

⁶ The implications of the distinction between ownership and exercise of power are insightfully discussed by Tavares da Silva (2017).

the drawing of lots and the election of representatives. Once again, the tension between the need to include the citizenry as a sign of equality and the need to put expert and eminent decision-makers in control is broken by representation. “Guicciardini [...] ranks the two objectives. Whereas the first (equality before the law) must be realized without restrictions, Guicciardini goes on, the second (equal access to public office) should be sought only within certain limits, for the fate of the city must not be left in the hands of *those who are merely adequate*. This is where election is seen to be superior to lot” (Manin 1997, pp. 61-62, my emphasis). The representative government is presented by Guicciardini as an institutional means to insert an aristocratic corrective into an egalitarian and participatory framework. Manin clearly summarizes this dynamic: “Elections are thus preferable to lot since they *select the best* while still leaving it up to the people to *discern who are the best*” (Manin, 1997, p. 62, my emphasis).

The idea of the aristocratic function of political representation returns in the reflections of James Madison, who is hailed as the “Father” of the US Constitution. Madison strongly defended the need for expert and virtuous decision-makers in key political roles. He argued that “[t]he aim of every political constitution is, or ought to be, first to obtain for rulers men who possess most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common good of the society” (Hamilton, Madison, Jay, 2005, p. 309). Madison defines the function of representation by appealing to the need for virtuous people to implement policies that affect the whole community. In his view, the people’s “representative trust” depends on the quality of the few, who are distinguished by their virtues and, for this reason, are called to govern (Hamilton, Madison, Jay, 2005, p. 310). In Federalist no. 10 Madison is even more explicit: representation is what allows us “to refine and enlarge the public views, by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country” (Hamilton, Madison, Jay, 2005, p. 52). It is worth noting that the qualities mentioned by Madison are primarily moral ones: representatives must be true patriots capable of mediating conflicts between factions. To this, however, an epistemic feature is added. Indeed, Madison is referring to the country’s elite, who—as we will see in the next section—possess the expertise necessary to deal with public problems. As Epstein suggested, Madison is betting on an elite, composed of virtuous and enlightened citizens (Epstein, 1984, p. 93). In Madison’s view, representation serves as an aristocratic counterforce to democracy⁷, as it stabilizes popular involvement through the mediation of a restricted body that—as we have seen—is able to “refine” and “enlarge” the opinions of the people. When commenting Adams’ analysis of bicameralism, Hofstadter contended that US Constitution introduced both aristocratic and democratic

⁷ For a discussion of Madison’s antidemocratic republicanism see, among others, Wood (1969; 1987), Sharp (1993), and Samples (2002).

elements, so that “the aristocracy and the democracy must be made to neutralize each other” (Hofstadter, 1989, p. 13).

The aristocratic understanding of political representation has recently found a very powerful form of expression in epistocratic philosophy. The possibility of using representation as a device for selecting enlightened decision-makers has acquired so much theoretical credit that epistocratic scholars have used it to overcome democracy itself. In other words, the “elitist/aristocratic” aspect within democracy has supplanted the participatory one, deforming the entire political process with the insistence that its outcomes be good or, at least, be generated by competent decision-makers. According to epistocrats, having competent representatives is such an urgent requirement that even those who select them must be competent. This democratic elitism embraces a “principle of competence” which seeks to prevent any possible harm and mistakes caused by political decisions simply by ensuring that the individuals responsible for them act competently (Brennan, 2016, pp. 149-167). In this radical reading, the election of representatives becomes the procedure by which power is handed over to an elite of experts. Brennan, for instance, argues that the electorate should be vetted on the basis of its political competence⁸ so that those elected might be selected by a competent constituency. Similarly, López-Guerra advocates an enfranchisement mechanism that combines sortition and a “competence building process” to ensure that voters are epistemically empowered to select representatives (López-Guerra, 2014). Epistocratic theory crystallizes the elitist/aristocratic reading of political representation by stressing the consequentialist facet of politics and invoking the need to select expert and reliable decision-makers⁹. The whole epistocratic argument assumes that political representation is about identifying and empowering an elite of expert rulers in view of social consequences that democracy must produce. Again, epistocracy elaborates and reshapes the elitist concern to safeguard the expertise of the elites within the democratic process of political decision-making.

2. LAY EXPERTISE: AN INTERNAL CRITICISM OF THE ELITIST THEORY OF REPRESENTATION

The previous section tried to show how representation has been justified as an elitist/aristocratic device in the history of political thought. In this reading, political representation acts as a filter, facilitating access to political office for expert elites.

⁸ All the epistocrats assume that competence means acquaintance with the economic and social sciences, the constitutional rules governing the political game, and knowledge of parties'/candidates' platforms. We will focus on the kind of expertise endorsed by this aristocratic interpretation of political representation in the following section.

⁹ The centrality of expert decision-makers in the epistocratic argument is highlighted by Bell (2015) and Khanna (2017).

According to this perspective, elections—unlike lots or direct participation—constitute a selection criterion that favors the most illustrious personalities, who belong to a socio-cultural elite (an aspect on which we will focus in this section). This understanding depicts and justifies representation as a corrective to the democratic mechanism, which is heavily inspired by the ideal of egalitarian participation by the whole citizenry. In this respect, representation is presented as an “aristocratic” device. The present section will focus on the type of expertise that, according to the elitist theory, representation places at the forefront of the political process. The underlying idea is that representation, as an instrument to inject expertise into policymaking, goes hand in hand with a top-down understanding of expertise itself. Indeed, the understanding of representation as a tool to limit inclusion and thus protect expertise in decision-making assumes that the expertise itself resides in the knowledge of notables. Consequently, to concentrate competence in the democratic process it is necessary—as we have seen—to balance the participation of all with the power of a few. This connection erroneously ends up defending the leading role of this specific expertise in the decision-making process, corroborating the undue opposition between inclusion and expertise. The problems raised by this argument will be investigated by outlining and discussing the notion of “lay expertise”. This concept makes it clear that the concern to ensure a “competent” decision-making process does not justify the centrality of top-down experts and, more importantly, does not justify the need for an “elitist/aristocratic aspect” within the democratic paradigm geared toward counteracting citizens’ inclusion.

The type of expertise evoked in the first section and possessed by the people selected to be representatives constitutes an example of what I will define as *top-down expertise*. This expertise can be described as “top-down” because it belongs to a group which—as seen in the first section—possesses recognizable traits of excellence and stands at the top of the socio-cultural hierarchy. Top-down experts can be characterized by the intersection of four traits: 1) the right credentials; 2) a good track record; 3) knowledge for action; 4) belonging to a scrutinizing community. Credentials include those qualifications that enable an expert to receive recognition. In contemporary society, credentials are above all those qualifications acquired by following a training course which implies the acquisition of specific knowledge and skills (i.e., degrees, doctorates, certificates). By track record I mean the set of results that an individual has produced in his or her field: the articles and books written by an academic, the buildings designed by an architect, the cases won by a lawyer, etc. In the past, of course, credentials and track records were less formalized than today. However, the “notables” evoked in the previous section emerged through a combination of these two aspects: the prestige of the training they had received (credentials) and the achievements in their field (track record). Consider, for example, a general’s victories in battle and the consequent fame

ensured by those victories. Knowledge for action is the third aspect of top-down expertise and captures the expectation regarding expertise described in the first section, that is, the confidence that expertise can concretely refine the effectiveness of public decision-making. Top-down expertise entails the ability to read problems, foresee their development, and act to manipulate them (Grundmann, 2017, p. 27). Finally, the fourth element refers to the circle of these experts and the related scrutiny that the community exercises on the work of its members. Top-down expertise embodies the result of cooperation between several actors, who interweave their work in order to cross-check and refine the outputs.

The role and traits of the expertise in question have been discussed by various scholars. In particular, the literature aimed at analyzing the contribution of expertise in the political process ends up evoking the top-down version of expertise described here. Using a metaphor, Jeffrey argues that the expert operates like a university researcher in the field of sleep disorders who describes to her son the possible solutions to be adopted in order to have a healthy sleep (Jeffrey, 2017, pp. 426-427). Recalling the four points mentioned above, the metaphor of the university researcher implies that this expert has certain credentials (a PhD or a degree allowing her to be a researcher), possesses knowledge for action (illustrates to her son the available options to ensure a healthy sleep), and is part of a scrutinizing community (the academic and clinical network). Another example is given by Bell. This author focuses on the Chinese technocratic government, praising the centrality of trained and experienced rulers. In that context, Bell observes, only educated people, who have passed difficult public examinations, and have proven experience in public management are found in leadership positions (Bell, 2015, p. 78). Once again, expertise in decision-making is identified here on the basis of credentials (education), a track record (examinations passed), and knowledge for action (results in public management). Finally, Schudson characterizes the role of experts in democracy by emphasizing their training and experience, the fact that they provided a “record of truth” and a “commitment to truth-seeking according to the best standards of the expert community” (Schudson, 2006, p. 500). In Schudson’s analysis too we find the above-mentioned traits, in particular: credentials, a track record, and belonging to a scrutinizing community.

One may argue that these analyses describe the expertise of experts, not representatives. However, the problem from which this investigation starts is the hypothesis that representation is designed to make the former coincide with the latter, that is, making sure that “top-down” expertise guides representatives. In the elitist reading under consideration, representatives should either directly possess top-down expertise or, more simply, defer to this type of expertise for their decisions. The crucial point here is that representatives, as a political elite, approach political decisions by taking top-down expertise as their lodestar. Therefore, top-down expertise either directly or indirectly orients the deliberation of the “best and

brightest” individuals selected thought representation. We now need to ask ourselves whether the kind of top-down expertise that representation is supposed to promote according to these theorists really constitutes a bulwark against ineffective decisions and inefficient policies. Even more importantly, it is necessary to explore the idea that bottom-up participation spoils the elites’ plans and must therefore be limited. Both questions find a negative answer when considered in relation to a different form of expertise, known as “lay expertise” in the literature.

The concept of lay expertise is an oxymoron used to describe the competence possessed by people who are closer to amateurs than to top-down experts. In particular, lay experts acquire competence through direct experience in a certain area, yet remain without formal certifications or achievements in that area. While top-down experts enter the process “from above”, these individuals contribute to the process “from below”, leveraging informal, experiential, and often poorly accredited knowledge. Lay expertise clearly emerges in the famous cases of AIDS activists and Cumbrian shepherds discussed by Epstein (1995) and Wynne (1996), respectively. In such cases, the top-down experts discovered credible interlocutors—bearers of uncertified cultural expertise—respectively in the AIDS activists contributing to define clinical protocols and the Cumbrian shepherds criticizing the way in which scientists were dealing with the effects of the Chernobyl disaster. These lay experts proved capable of understanding, correcting, or refining the conclusion of top-down experts and made it clear that bottom-up participation can be a plus—rather than a pitfall—in decision-making. Again, the lay experts in question did not gain prominence on account of their credentials and track records in the specific areas at issue. To some extent, they shared with top-down experts the fact of belonging to a scrutinizing community and possessing knowledge for action. Nonetheless, in the case lay experts, these last two traits capture their firsthand and unrecognized competence to deal with highly specific issues.

It is worth noting that each community of lay experts engages in scrutinizing through cultural and experience-based practices and standards, which make the community itself more difficult to recognize. With regard to this point, Turnhout and Neves emphasize the contrast between expertise and lay expertise by arguing that the latter is contextual and localized (rather than universal), culturally embedded (rather than objective), tacit or informal (rather than formalized), and practice- and experience-based (rather than methodological) (Turnhout & Neves, 2019, p. 184)¹⁰. The unique contribution of lay expertise lies, to quote Turnhout and Neves again, in its “situatedness”, that is, in the epistemic energy released

¹⁰ The relevance of locality in expertise studies is highlighted in the works of Barrotta and Montuschi (2018a, 2018b). In discussing “local knowledge” (or “local experience”) in relation to “scientific knowledge” (or “official knowledge”) by focusing on the “Vajont disaster”, the authors call for an interaction between these different forms expertise, so that general knowledge may be applied to specific contexts.

through the cultural and experiential knowledge of elements that “top-down” experts fail to grasp or consider (such as the needs of the AIDS community or the specificity of Cumbrian sheep) (Turnhout & Neves, 2019, p. 191). Lay expertise embraces “different traditions and styles in the production and use of expertise, and the different ideas about what constitutes relevant and valid knowledge in different countries, political systems, and regulatory fields” (Turnhout & Neves, 2019, p. 191). In Myskja’s words, “lay experts serve the role of the clear-sighted, because they are able to ‘see’ the world differently so as to correct the scientific view” (Myskja, 2007, p. 7). Very briefly, lay expertise integrates and potentially corrects the conclusions reached by experts.

In the case described by Epstein, patients were able to broaden the research horizon on AIDS by promoting an approach more open “to the varying of experimental design in recognition of practical barriers, ethical demands, and other ‘real-world’ exigencies” (Epstein, 1995, p. 423). As Epstein pointed out, AIDS activists paved new roads for science, by appealing to their experience, knowledge, and interests in order to take a stand in the debate on the issue and put pressure on the biomedical establishment (Epstein, 1998). This group underwent a process of “expertification” (Epstein, 1998, p. 13), ending up generating knowledge about AIDS through the means at their disposal (Epstein, 1998, pp. 18-19). Similarly, the Cumbrian shepherds engaged with government experts and their plans to manage the high level of radioactivity in Cumbria. Despite the narrow-mindedness of the “blokes” sent by the government (Wynne, 1996, p. 66), the shepherds anticipated the failure of the strategies implemented, which suffered from excessive generalization and failed to consider the behavior of the ewes and the composition of the soil. The strong specificity of the context made the competence of the top-down experts sent by the government hardly applicable or, at least, vulnerable to serious mistakes. As Barrotta and Gronda remarked, “it is possible to be highly competent in one field [...] without thereby being able to act as a good expert in the case under consideration” (Barrotta & Gronda, 2022, pp. 6-7)¹¹. Shepherds’ epistemology “assumed predictability to be intrinsically unreliable as an assumption, and therefore valued adaptability and flexibility, as a key part of their cultural identity and practical knowledge” (Wynne, 1996, p. 67). Contrastingly, “scientific experts ignored or misunderstood the multidimensional complexity of this lay public’s problem domain, and thus made different assumptions about its controllability” (Wynne, 1996, p. 67). Several of those assumptions failed. From different angles, the takeaway from lay experts’ inclusion is that decision-making can benefit from an alliance between different kinds of expertise and—an equally important point – is restricted by “aristocratizing” the decision-making process and its participants.

¹¹ These authors discuss the problem of applying general knowledge to specific contexts: see esp. Barrotta and Gronda (2022, pp. 4-7).

Lay expertise provides a valuable contribution to the study of expertise in decision-making processes and, in particular, to the investigation of the kind of experts capable of ensuring judicious and cogent public choices. The consideration of lay expertise jeopardizes the premises of the reasoning set out in the first section, outlining an “internal” counterargument to elitist representation. Indeed, if the purpose of political representation is to select expert decision-makers in order to ensure accurate and competent outcomes, how are we to explain the exclusion of a form of bottom-up expertise capable of enriching and correcting the outcomes of this process? Moreover, the justification of political representation as a barrier to participation in view of more accurate conclusions rests on a reductionist reading of expertise and prejudice toward any “knowledge for action” that comes from below. To put it differently, the restriction of the decision-making chain to the top-down experts closes the door to the possibility that the inclusion of other epistemic agents may provide greater accuracy in terms of the decisions made. If representation is justified because of the value of expertise, as the elitist theory suggests, it is necessary to explain why we should exclude lay experts and the related scrutiny they can provide. Lay expertise challenges the idea that bringing an elitist/aristocratic element into the participative decision-making process can refine the political outcomes generated by such process.

3. LAY EXPERTISE: AN EXTERNAL CRITICISM OF THE ELITIST THEORY OF REPRESENTATION

Previous sections have dealt with the elitist/aristocratic justification of representation (section 1) and the notion of lay expertise (section 2). In my discussion of lay expertise, I have sought to emphasize that the need for epistemically accurate decision-making does not justify the domination of top-down experts and, accordingly, does not explain the need for the aristocratic aspect evoked by elitist theory of representation. The present section advances a second argument against the elitist understanding of representation, one based on the use of representation made by lay experts themselves. Looking in particular to Epstein’s study of AIDS activists, this section will argue that we cannot reduce representation to an exclusionary device, as the elitist reading does. More properly, behind representation there lie a series of possible epistemic and political mechanisms—among them, exclusion—which are aimed at realizing a mediation between different groups with different competences. In this way, lay expertise spotlights an “external” argument against the elitist theory of representation, that is, a characterization of representation as a form of mediation that elitist theorists have failed to include in their framework.

As already mentioned, Epstein has investigated how lay expertise emerges in the exchange between the AIDS movement and the biomedical establishment. This

case is particularly interesting, as it directly illustrates the function of representation in political and epistemic disputes within democratic society. Indeed, the AIDS community leveraged the representative mechanism to organize and strengthen the dialogue with doctors and biomedical circles. This allowed lay experts to have a greater impact on the design of clinical trials by ensuring that their views on the urgency of the epidemic and the need to adopt a “pragmatic approach”¹² would be taken into consideration. The dialogue between AIDS activists and expert decision-makers in the area of biomedicine was strongly marked by a gap in terms of knowledge about drugs and treatments for the HIV virus. Activists were less skilled than the biomedical establishment, who spoke a specialized language and, more importantly, were quite skeptical about activists’ ability to contribute to their work. These difficulties, Epstein argues, made activists aware of the need to present themselves as credible interlocutors and, in doing so, to win a seat at the decision-making table. Credibility was the key to define a more participatory and inclusive decision-making process, which could enrich the “top-down” expertise of doctors with the contextual and experiential expertise of the activists themselves.

The building of credibility occurred through four strategies on which Epstein focuses: the acquisition of cultural competence, the establishment of political representation, the yoking together of epistemological and ethical claim-making, and the taking of sides in pre-existing methodological disputes. What is of interest for this section is the second element of Epstein’s reasoning, namely, the use of political representation as a tool for the inclusion and diversification of expertise in the definition of clinical trials. “A second way in which AIDS treatment activists have striven to present themselves as credible is through the establishment of themselves as representatives. That is, a basic “credibility achievement” of treatment activists has been their capacity to present themselves as the legitimate, organized voice of people with AIDS or HIV infection” (Epstein, 1995, p. 419). Moreover, Epstein remarks that “the extraordinary success of treatment activists (who have always been a relatively small group and whose ranks have been further depleted by burnout, illness, and death over the years) stemmed in large part from their capacity to convince the biomedical establishment not only that they spoke for the larger body of patients, but also that they could mobilize hundreds or thousands of angry demonstrators to give muscle to their specific requests” (Epstein, 1995, p. 420).

Epstein’s analysis of lay experts highlights a second theoretical point concerning representation. The first conceptual point, as we have seen, is internal to the elitist theory of representation: if representation is really intended to improve the accuracy of the decision-making process, supporters of that interpretation still need to justify

¹² This approach, unlike the “fastidious” one, incorporates more data from clinical practice in order to answer questions in clinical management. On the contrary, the fastidious approach, supported by biomedical establishment, advocates a “clean” organizing of trials, based on homogeneous groups to avoid ambiguity and biases: see esp. Epstein (1995, p. 422).

the absolute pre-eminence of a “top-down” kind of expertise and the marginalization of a “bottom-up” one (i.e., that of the lay expertise) (section 2). In addition to this point, there is a second, “external” criticism of the elitist view of representation. Lay expertise makes it clear that representation embraces a range of functions and, accordingly, is not exhaustively defined by its exclusionary potential. This further assessment is “external” as it is not developed by following the premises of the elitist approach (i.e., the need for epistemic accuracy in decision-making and the consequent urgency to identify an epistemic body of reliable experts). Rather, this second criticism is formulated by recognizing additional functions of representation. Indeed, the political potential of representation largely transcends the simplistic image of representation as a tool to contain participation and privilege the expertise of a specific group. Representation can instead be regarded as a political device to mediate views between different and rival conceptions of expertise. In such a way, representation integrates different epistemic stands into a participatory decision-making process.

This is precisely what occurred with AIDS activists. Epstein remarks that the latter were able effectively to collect and sum up the concerns and inputs coming from patients, capitalizing on their capacity to better grasp the stakes and, consequently, question the positions of the top-down biomedical experts. Epstein retraces the “pathway to expertise among the treatment activist elite” by recalling the story of one of the leaders of ACT UP/New York’s Treatment & Data Committee, Mark Harrington (Epstein, 1995, p. 418). Harrington worked as coffee-house waiter and a freelance writer: he soon took stock of his ignorance about science and federal bureaucracy and worked hard to become acquainted with these areas. The competence he acquired proved crucial in order for him to gain access to biomedical institutions and eventually bring them face to face with the experience of the whole AIDS community. In a nutshell, the contact and subsequent alliance between top-down and lay experts occurred through the mediation of lay experts’ representatives, who—in Epstein’s words—had the “capacity to present themselves as the legitimate, organized voice of people with AIDS or HIV infection” (Epstein, 1995, p. 419).

Representation reveals all its political potential here: while representation includes the power to filter out and exclude certain positions, as whole it embodies a set of political elements. As Brito Vieira and Runciman have brilliantly pointed out, political representation describes a complex phenomenon or, even better, a set of different dynamics: descriptive representation, symbolic representation, and authorization (Brito Vieira & Runciman, 2008, pp. 5-10). Similarly, Brown singles out “different elements of an internally complex concept of democratic representation” (Brown, 2008, p. 205): authorization, accountability, participation, deliberation, and resemblance (Brown, 2008, pp. 206-237). One cannot reduce representation to a single political tool having a sole function: to do so is to run the

same risk as the blind professors examining different parts of an elephant, each believing he or she has discovered the real thing—a snake, a tree—when in fact each has grasped only part of the whole (Brown, 2008, p. 205).

This image proposed by Brown is perfect in order to grasp the complexity of the mediation between the different types of expertise that representation allows. The elitist theory does not discover the elephant, that is, it does not grasp the number of functions composing representation. Representatives have the power to exclude certain views. In this sense, it remains true that representation can operate as an exclusionary device. In the case of AIDS, for instance, leaders like Harrington are in the position to dismiss claims made by AIDS patients which, if brought into dialogue with doctors, might jeopardize the credibility of activist groups and diminish their role in the search for better treatment protocols. AIDS patients' representatives like Harrington were delegated to speak on behalf of the AIDS community because of the competence they had acquired on both the direct experience of AIDS and the kind of scientific/bureaucratic issues that doctors needed to reflect on. They represented the AIDS patients' community by voicing their interests (responsive representation) and identifying viable solutions with doctors in light of the state of the art of biomedical research (indicative representation) (Pettit 2010). To borrow Brown's categories, representation can here be seen to enshrine a set of key political mechanisms: authorization (speaking with doctors on behalf of the whole AIDS community), accountability (with respect to any criticism or dissatisfaction expressed by members of the AIDS community), participation (of community members in the dialogue with top-down experts), deliberation (about the possible solutions to be accepted and adopted), and resemblance (between AIDS representatives and AIDS community members). It would be highly misleading to portray representation as an exclusionary device, as the elitist theory does. On the contrary, the function of the representative combines filtering with synthesis, advocacy with accountability, exclusion with inclusion. However, this political richness of representation is not taken into account by the elitist account.

This reassessment of representation clarifies its capability to provide a mediation between different kinds of knowledge and interests—or between different positions supported by different experts. Fuerstein describes this kind of mediation work in the Minneapolis “2040 Plan”, by explaining how the representatives involved in the project carefully avoided following the advice of people who had no idea of the issues they were addressing (Fuerstein, 2020, p. 155). Alongside this filtering/exclusionary function, however, representatives possess the epistemic tools to operate a synthesis with respect to both knowledge and values, in order to assimilate the perspectives of different groups across social, geographical, ethnic, and epistemic classes. Fuerstein also emphasizes these aspects through the term “integration”: “The integration required must flow from experts toward the broader

system of decision-making (downward vertical integration), from non-experts toward that system (upward vertical integration) and between non-experts at different social locations (horizontal integration). If, on the standard account, the fundamental task of representation is the advancement of interests, then we can understand representatives as occupying a distinctive role which facilitates these different kinds of epistemic integration” (Fuerstein, 2020, p. 162).

The epistemic and axiological mediation of representatives is made possible by the authorization that representatives receive by those represented, by representatives’ accountability to those represented, by the resemblance between the represented and the representatives, and by the contacts that the representatives maintain with the represented (in terms of deliberation and participation). All these elements constitute and enable the kind of mediation performed by representatives of lay expertise in the AIDS case discussed by Epstein. A discussion of lay expertise thus shows that representation incorporates a number of political and epistemic functions that the elitist theory does not properly consider. Representation and expertise are not linked by the need to exclude, but rather by the urgency to integrate. More specifically, this section has tried to show that the representatives of lay experts possess the strength to win a seat at top-down experts’ table and, by doing so, to create the conditions for a more inclusive decision-making process. In such a way, representation integrates different epistemic stands into a participatory path where different forms of expertise can find a place.

CONCLUSION

The analysis developed in this paper can be framed within the study of the relationship and tension between democracy and expertise. The growing complexity of contemporary societies makes the question of expertise an urgent, if not challenging, one. How can we reconcile the need for specialized knowledge with the widespread participation of amateur people who are called upon to have a say on economic, environmental, and military problems? The need for expertise can easily be transformed into a foothold for technocratic, epistocratic, or elitist change. The problem was clearly posed by Moore: “If we assume that in complex societies reliance on expertise is unavoidable, valuable, and yet potentially threatening to democratic ideals, then we need to devote more attention to the question of how reliance on expertise is organized and how its legitimacy might be sustained” (Moore, 2021, p. 554).

This paper has explored the problem by examining three sub-concepts within the “democracy-expertise” dyad: political representation, top-down expertise, and lay expertise. The elitist answer to the problem of expertise in democratic societies lies in the use of representation to filter the influence of people in decision-making (section 1). Against this reading, I have stressed the need for diverse forms of

expertise: for a kind of expertise capable of intercepting problems and points of view different from those of the “top-down” official experts (section 2). Furthermore, the analysis has underlined that representation goes far beyond its mere filtering function. It fulfills several other functions too, allowing a mediation between different forms of knowledge and interests, and setting the stage for a participatory approach to public decision-making (section 3).

Still, one might object that the rejection of the elitist theory of representation through the investigation of lay expertise risks only lowering, not eliminating, the epistemic requirements to allow participation in decision-making. Indeed, whereas the elitist theory entails the centrality of top-down expertise, the thesis defended here aims to include an informal and specific form of expertise. This risks only changing the requirements to qualify as a legitimate epistemic agent in the decision-making process. In short, lay experts would emerge as a second elite, again ruling out the possibility of having a truly inclusive and participatory process.

The point, however, is not that lay expertise identifies new requirements for political participation, by replacing one form of elitism with another, less demanding one. Lay expertise captures the urgency of pluralizing the expertise that orients public decisions, especially by going beyond the blind faith in “top-down” epistemic elites. This brings us back to where we started, namely the “democracy-expertise” dyad. Democracy needs experts because of its consequential nature. Indeed, democracy can be regarded as a decision-making system aimed at generating outcomes, that is, a process designed to outline policies and, through them, generate social results. This certainly does not entail an instrumentalist view of the nature of democracy (Arneson, 2003, 2004, 2009)¹³. Nevertheless, the reflection on democracy can be hardly disconnected from its consequential dimension, that is, from the fact that democracy is not only about the expression and protection of values, but also about the realization of policies (Elster, 1997, p. 25; Waldron, 1998, p. 317). In this view, faith in democracy is not merely a paean to certain values, but also the belief that democracy provides the political tools to address political urgencies: from peace and prosperity to social and environmental justice. For this reason, expertise (and experts) in democratic society cannot be annihilated by the egalitarianism that inspires the democratic institutional framework. Expertise embodies an aspect of the democratic procedure to ensure answers to complex problems without compromising the equal freedom of citizens. In this sense, the analysis of lay expertise does not suggest eliminating epistemic authorities, by allowing any actor to qualify as a beacon in technical-scientific disputes. More prudentially, lay expertise fragments the notion and social identity of “epistemic authorities” in democratic society. Lay expertise challenges the monopoly of top-down experts upheld by the elitist theory of representation by revealing the positive

¹³ By instrumentalism I mean the justification of democracy based on the quality of its outcomes. In this reading, democracy acquires legitimacy if it proves to be a means to make good decisions.

results that stem from diversifying expertise. In this sense, lay experts emerge as an inclusive elite, as they make use of their expertise to claim that expertise is a matter of mediation between different forms of knowledge and interests that representative democracy can and must realize.

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