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After Post-Truth: Revisiting the Lippmann–Dewey Debate

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Abstract

The debate on post-truth has sought to restore what it held to be the proper relationship between knowledge, truth, and political judgment. This made for an intuitively plausible response to the experience of democracy itself being increasingly contested. However, with the re-election of Donald Trump as US president and a broad array of instances of democratic backsliding in Europe and beyond, such a restorative framing may have exhausted itself. Therefore, we suggest revisiting the Lippmann–Dewey debate as a starting point for an alternative way of theorizing the contemporary crisis of democracy and knowledge production. The article outlines the potential of revisiting the Lippmann–Dewey debate to this end in three steps. First, we read the Lippmann–Dewey debate as a classical instance of the contestation of the concept of (liberal) democracy. Second, we discuss the relevance of two fundamentally different perspectives on the politics of knowledge: expertise and education. Third, we introduce two empirical sites to further illustrate such reflexive contestedness: the contestation of economic knowledge during European austerity politics and the role of Scientists for Future in environmental protests. A brief conclusion reflects on how one could think of the paradigmatic positions of Dewey and Lippmann not as mutually exclusive but complementary ways to problematize democracy in crisis.

1. Introduction

The end of history has ended. Fukuyama's (1989) flamboyant claim that liberal democracy after the end of the Cold War was without alternatives has always been theoretically contested. It circulated so widely and gained idiomatic notoriety beyond academia, however, because it did capture a sense of liberal-democratic

triumphalism which seemed intuitively plausible at the time. This is no more. Democracy, liberal and otherwise, is now widely considered to face rollbacks, backsliding, and, more generally, a type of contestation which no longer allows us to take it for granted. Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as US president in 2016 marked a moment of discontinuity; from then on democracy, and with it the complex relationship between knowledge, truth, and political judgment, were visibly contested even in places where it had been considered to be most firmly established. The influential debate on post-truth can be read as a reaction to this particular constellation. Indeed, as the recent literature on post-truth argues, liberal democracies are under increasing pressure exactly because the distinction between truth and falsity has broken down in public life; and it seems plausible to suggest that the remedy of reinstating this distinction can only be achieved by fact-checking and the propagation of scientific knowledge (Ball, 2017; D'Ancona, 2017; E. Davis, 2017; McIntyre, 2018; Michiko, 2018). Hence, the critical impetus of these debates was restorative and, by and large, underwritten by a reading of Brexit, Trump, and democratic backsliding as a disruption of an orderly arrangement of knowledge, truth, and political judgment.

The re-election of Donald Trump as US president in 2024 and a concurrent wave of democratic backsliding throughout Europe (and elsewhere), however, signal not a temporary disruption but rather a shift at the levels of political practice and semantics which the post-truth framing seems increasingly ill-equipped to capture. Specifically, we argue that the post-truth framing centres contemporary interrogations of the crisis of democracy around three presuppositions. First, it locates the problem firmly and unilaterally on the side of an ill-informed citizenry. Second, it contrasts the ill-informed citizenry with an idealized vision of science as disinterested, morally pure, and therefore uniquely qualified to restore the quality of public communication. Third, it presents post-truth politics as a disruption from an idealized past where a "proper" public could be assumed to always already be there, as if it were a pre-existing and objectively given entity rather than a communicative process. While these presuppositions are of course not universally shared in the literature on post-truth politics (see, e.g., Schindler, 2024, on the social-theoretical preconditions of the crisis), they are nevertheless pervasive enough to invite a conversation on possible ways of reframing the contemporary crisis of democracy.

In order to move beyond the post-truth framing, we suggest revisiting a classic entry into the lexicon of democratic thought: the Lippmann–Dewey debate. Walter Lippmann and John Dewey famously clashed in the 1920s over the very possibility of a democratic public (Dewey, 1946; Lippmann, 1922, 1925). Revisiting the Lippmann–Dewey debate, we argue, can help to conceptualize the relationship between rulers and ruled as a communicative situation where the production and circulation of knowledge are at stake. This makes for a productive alternative to the post-truth debate as it moves beyond static and idealizing notions of knowledge, truth, politics, and democracy. Specifically, it allows for a focus on how the relationship between rulers and ruled is communicatively mediated and negotiated. The article thus seeks to develop such an analytics and to illustrate how it could generate new and interesting questions—in making sense of the role of expertise and education, or as a source of inspiration for the empirical study of how the production and circulation of knowledge plays out in social movements, political struggles, and the ensuing politics of crisis, which tellingly often comes in the form of a politics of crisis management.

More specifically, we suggest that revisiting the Lippmann–Dewey debate is particularly productive if we engage with it as a debate. From *Dewey* we can learn that democracy is more than a particular arrangement of political institutions where citizen participation amounts to little more than casting a ballot every few years,

but also more than a constant struggle for hegemony between principally antagonistic social groups. Both the narrow institutional view of democracy as a system of government, and a broader perspective on civil society and cultural hegemony typically rest on fixed and stable political imaginaries where the component parts are always already known in advance. Voters must have preexisting preferences (even if sociologists have their doubts, see Bourdieu, 1979) and social groups must be readily constituted before they can enter the zone of antagonism (see, e.g., the concept of multipolarity in Mouffe, 2009, which presupposes ready-made poles and thus presents a significantly more substantialist account of political identity than Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Dewey, in particular, invites us to dissolve all of these assumed fixities into their processes of production, transformation, and circulation, and in doing so he pushes the debate firmly beyond the confines of American democracy viewed as a particular system of government with its particular checks and balances. Hence, while the Lippmann–Dewey debate is triggered by a perceived crisis of American democracy, it is not tied to the particularities of the political system of the US. Indeed, revisiting the Lippmann–Dewey debate re-centres our attention from political systems to the societal conditions of possibility of democratic practice. Democracy, Dewey thus radically suggests, is a way of life and as such must be considered not only in terms of the political system but also in any other domain of social life. This includes, for example, education and economic production, which we will consider below (Dewey, 2018; Talisse, 2019).

From *Lippmann* we can learn that in order to make sense of the relationship between rulers and ruled as a communicative situation, we must study the actual communicative situation rather than hold on to a vision of what we hope this relationship could be. This is the core of Bruno Latour's reading of Lippmann as a Machiavelli of our time (dos Reis, 2019; Latour, 2024; Marres, 2005; Schölzel, 2021). In Latour's (2024, p. 45) words:

> If you despair of politics, it is because you've asked for more than it can give. You've imprudently burdened it with moral, religious, legal, and/or artistic tasks that it is powerless to fulfill. Ask for the impossible, and you'll harvest something atrocious or grotesque. If you want people to regain confidence in democracy, you first have to relieve it of the illusions that have transformed the dream of harmonious public life into a nightmare.

To read the Lippmann–Dewey debate as a debate (on the question of whether the Lippmann–Dewey debate actually was a debate at the time, see Fuller, 2024; Jansen, 2009; O'Gorman, 2024; Ralston, 2010; Schudson, 2008; Shechtman & Durham Peters, 2024), we suggest, is to hold together these two lessons in order to explore the preconditions of a democratic revival in the face of the state of actually existing democracy. Revisiting a century-old debate strikes as productive here because it helpfully precedes the division of labour, now firmly institutionalized, between (normative) political theory on the hand and (empirical) social research on the other.

In order to demonstrate how revisiting the Lippmann–Dewey debate may make for a productive alternative to a post-truth framing, the article proceeds in three steps. In a first step, we will discuss the what, the why care, and the what follows of the Lippmann–Dewey debate. In a second step, we demonstrate how the Lippmann–Dewey debate invites us to think beyond the institutional confines of political systems by discussing two fields of practice where the practical negotiation of the relation between knowledge, democracy, and judgment is at stake: expertise and education. In a third step, we briefly illustrate how the analytical perspective distilled from the Lippmann–Dewey debate can be put to work by zooming in on two recent examples of how the communicative relationship between rulers and ruled has become the subject of

public controversy: European austerity policies and Scientists for Future. In conclusion, we reflect on how one could think the paradigmatic positions of Dewey and Lippmann not as mutually exclusive but complementary ways to rethink the crisis of democracy.

2. The What, Why Care, and What Follows of the Lippmann–Dewey Debate?

The Lippmann–Dewey debate (sometimes also Dewey–Lippmann debate) stands as a significant discourse in the field of political theory and democratic theory. Arising from the intellectual contexts following World War I, the debate mainly unfolded in three books: Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion* from 1922, which received much acclaim, and *The Phantom Public* from 1925, which proved too pessimistic in its view of the world for the American Progressives (O'Gorman, 2024; Ralston, 2010). John Dewey would take up some of these themes in *The Public and its Problems* from 1927. On the surface, the stakes of the debate concern the foundations of modern democracy: an informed citizenry that is capable of rational participation in their own government. To Lippmann, the average citizen does not possess the capacity for rational self-government, and so he advocates for a turn towards science to help inform and organise public opinion. In contrast, Dewey argued that such an intellectual aristocracy would only further eclipse the public; what was needed instead was to revive the power of the public to make it possible for it to be articulated, heard, and followed (Bybee, 1999).

If the Lippmann–Dewey debate remains relevant, it is exactly because it problematizes what is taken for granted today. Hence, it contrasts sharply with the recent debate on post-truth politics which suggests that public opinion has been poisoned by populist politicians, deceiving media, and ignorant masses by means of lies and manipulation (e.g., Ball, 2017; McIntyre, 2018). In this view, public opinion becomes its own self-contained entity rather than an amalgamation of diverging forces. This results in the problematic belief that the cure for the malady of post-truth politics is the formation of a "correct" and scientifically informed public opinion, which is capable of reconstituting truth in democratic politics. The basis for this belief is, therefore, that modern science possesses some kind of tacit moral structure affording it a privileged position in curating a healthy public (Pennock, 2019). In sum, the post-truth framing rests on a fixed and idealized image of the relationship between a (singular) public, science, and politics based on which one can do little more than lament the current situation as an undesirable deviation from the orderly status quo.

Against this, revisiting the Lippmann–Dewey debate allows for a different and more productive problematization centred on three key themes. First, it constitutes the *epistemic challenge for democracy* as a communicative situation between ruler and ruled (Estlund, 2012; Goodin & Spiekermann, 2018; Talisse, 2019). Second, it conceptualizes the public not as a given condition for democracy, but rather as either a *fabrication* (Lippmann), or an *emergent property* in confrontation with a problem (Dewey, see also Herborth & Kessler, 2010). Third, it highlights both the promise, but also the problematic *status of science* in relation to democracy. Taking these three themes together, it becomes clear that public opinion cannot simply be equated with democratic knowledge. Instead, it advances an analytic where public opinion, or simply the public, is an amalgamation of forces that constitutes the particular communicative relationship between ruler and ruled, and what we refer to as democracy depends on the nature of this communicative relationship. Science may inform and contribute to the process of democratic knowledge production, but it does not occupy a superior position in it. Hence, it raises the question of the politics of how knowledge is produced and how it circulates.

2.1. The Epistemic Challenge for Democracy

Lippmann is concerned with the public's ability to govern. Hence, he starts *Public Opinion* by exploring the epistemological problem of the gap between real events and our experiences of them, which is mediated by mental pictures: "The real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance" (Lippmann, 1922, p. 16). Rather, "what each man does is based not on direct and certain knowledge, but on pictures made by himself or given to him" (Lippmann, 1922, p. 25). Lippmann terms this inner world of mental pictures a "pseudo-environment." It is comprised of manufactured myths and fictions that provide us with maps that are necessary to navigate social existence. Our actions, Lippmann contends, are wholly dependent upon our pseudo-environment. Because of this gap between events and experience, our mental pictures are, by definition, always misleading, they are never finished, but they can also always be clearer or more nuanced. Hence, as Lippmann (1922, p. 30) explains:

> [We are limited by] the artificial censorships, the limitations of social contact, the comparatively meager time available in each day for paying attention to public affairs, the distortion arising because events have to be compressed into very short messages, the difficulty of making a small vocabulary express a complicated world, and finally the fear of facing those facts which would seem to threaten the established routine of men's lives.

Dewey departs from a similar distinction when he differentiates between "facts" and the "meaning of facts," i.e., between facts and their interpretation. To Dewey (1946, p. 6), "no one is ever forced by just the collection of facts to accept a particular theory of their meaning." Thus, while we might come to some kind of agreement on the factual phenomena of political behaviour, we cannot arrive at a stable interpretation of the meaning of such phenomena.

For Dewey, the usual remedy of relying on facts, which are "verifiably ascertained," is not a plausible way forward, for the simple reason that "political facts are not outside human desire and judgment" (Dewey, 1946, p. 6). There is no way of isolating the *de facto* from the *de jure*, and despite the prestige of the natural sciences, the alternatives before us of a "factually limited science" and "uncontrolled speculation" are false ones, "[t]he more sincerely we appeal to facts," Dewey (1946, p. 7) informs us, "the greater is the importance of the distinction between facts which condition human activity and facts which are conditioned by human activity." The former are facts of association and political action, while the latter are the interpretations of these and, thereby, dependent facts. The epistemic challenge arises from the condition that facts do not provide their own interpretation, and it is exacerbated precisely because these two kinds of facts are conflated while the belief that facts offer their own interpretation proliferates.

2.2. The Public as Fabrication or Emergent Property

To Lippmann, the public is entirely a fabrication. Public opinion, Lippmann (1922, p. 29) asserts, can be rightfully said to only consist of those misleading pictures that groups of people and societies act upon. The public does not *express* its opinion, but rather *aligns* itself for or against an already articulated position on a given topic. There is no common or national will, no group mind or social purpose. Lippmann thus rejects traditional liberal political theory (to which the notion of *vox populi*, of the natural endowment where rational citizens come together to form a common will, was so central) as it fails to deal with this complexity

because it assumes that the rational individual is capable of perfectively knowing the outside world. In practice, public opinion can only ever appear, Lippmann argues, by skilfully playing on the irrationality of man and the ambiguity of symbols—that is, as every political leader knows, public opinion has to be manufactured by the technical use of symbols to produce an illusory yet effective common will. Lippmann (1922, p. 208) terms this the "manufacture of consent" and asserts:

> The creation of consent is not a new art. It is a very old one which was supposed to have died out with the appearance of democracy. But it has not died out. It has, in fact, improved enormously in technic, because it is now based on analysis rather than rule of thumb. And so, as a result of psychological research, coupled with the modern means of communication, the practice of democracy has turned a corner.

Public opinion is the mobilization of force (Lippmann, 1922, pp. 248–249). Thus, when leaders claim to represent *the* public opinion, the "public" as such does not exist: Public opinion is wholly manufactured by special interest groups with advanced techniques to serve their interests.

It is not only because the press is organized as a business where advertisement is necessary since consumers are unwilling to pay the real costs of gathering quality information, but also because of an epistemological distance between news and truth that modern mass communication media (whether in the form of print, radio, or television) fail to produce a genuine public opinion which can guide communal action. As Lippmann (1922, p. 358) points out:

> News and truth are not the same thing, and must be clearly distinguished. The function of news is to signalize an event, the function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts, to set them into relation with each other, and make a picture of reality on which men can act.

In contrast to the scientist, the journalist does not have special access to truth. Yet, Lippmann observes, the press has slowly become the leading actor in the public sphere; it has, in the absence of well-functioning institutions, falsely become the vital organ of direct democracy: "The Court of Public Opinion, open day and night, is to lay down the law for everything all the time" (Lippmann, 1922, p. 363). The press, Lippmann (1922, p. 362) explains, "is too frail to carry the whole burden of popular sovereignty, to supply spontaneously the truth." The problem, Lippmann (1922, p. 365) argues, lies deeper than the functioning of the press: It lies in "the failure of self-governing people to transcend their casual experience and their prejudice, by inventing, creating, and organizing a machinery of knowledge." In *The Phantom Public*, Lippmann makes this problem of the fundamental unit of the public the crux of the problem. The common citizen "lives in a world which he cannot see, does not understand, and is unable to direct" and it is therefore impossible to "move him...with a good straight talk about service and civic duty, nor by waving a flag in his face, nor by sending a boy scout after him to make him vote" (Lippmann, 1925, pp. 4–5). The private citizen "gives but a little of his time to public affairs, has but a casual interest in facts and but a poor appetite for theory" (Lippmann, 1925, pp. 14–15).

Dewey puts forward a different view. The issue is not that the public is a complete fabrication. Rather, it is with the facts of association that we discover the state and the public: "There is no mystery about the facts of association, of an interconnected action which affects the activity of singular elements. There is no sense in asking how individuals come to be associated. They exist and operate in association" (Dewey, 1946, p. 23).

The state is the totality of association, which is not a given, but which has to be found and clarified through the interaction of the citizenry:

> The lasting, extensive and serious consequences of associated activity bring into existence a public. In itself it is unorganized and formless. By means of the officials and their special power it becomes a state. A public articulated and operating through representative officers is the state; there is no state without a government, but also there is none without the public. (Dewey, 1946, p. 67)

Thus, the public only comes into being because human communities are faced with particular problems. In response, they form publics to discuss and evaluate these problems and their solutions. As Dewey (1946, pp. 15–16) points out: "The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for."

2.3. The Status of Science

Having rejected traditional theories of public opinion, Lippmann turns towards (social) science to safeguard democracy from the challenges emanating from the complexities of the world. He envisions in *Public Opinion* a "machinery of knowledge"—made up of social scientists working for the various agencies of government— that may ameliorate the "failures of self-governing people to transcend their casual experience and their prejudice" (Lippmann, 1922, p. 396). Hence, in this book, Lippmann's version of a realistic democracy rests on the ability of the new scientific aristocracy to be "neutral to their prejudice, and capable of overcoming subjectivism" to discern the truth about the world (Lippmann, 1922, p. 396). For Lippmann, the point of democracy is not that everyone engages in self-government (how could they ever achieve this in the modern world), but to realize the "good life." He therefore does not see this elitism as an enemy of democracy, but rather a necessary measure to save it. Yet, when Lippmann rejected Newtonian and Darwinian science in *The Phantom Public* (because it is based on a metaphysics of certainty that makes knowledge of universal and unalterable truth possible), and started to explore the epistemological space of uncertainty that opened up because of advancements in quantum physics, he stood in awe: Science, he now believed, could no more than the mass communication media produce a public opinion that could face up to the world, and he thus restrained himself to only talking about the "neutralization of arbitrary force" by "workable adjustment" as the only way to deal with the challenges to the social body (Lippmann, 1925, p. 57).

The sciences thus occupy a central role for both: Where Lippmann initially formulated an elitist solution that in *Public Opinion* would rely on scientific government, he would later, in *Phantom Public*, display great disbelief in science to provide the necessary guidance to govern society. Dewey, in contrast, insisted on a democratic solution, where the public would only exist in so far as it was willing to engage with a particular common problem. Science could play a part in doing so, but its inclusion would also impose limitations as well as new problems. The main problem being that science as a human activity cannot be disinterested. As Dewey points out, historically, science itself has cherished the "pure" over the "applied," with the consequence that whenever science was applied it was done so with contempt and disregard for human concerns and in favour of the commercial interests of the few. That is, science was applied *to* human concerns rather than *in* them—where "application *in* life would signify that science was absorbed and distributed; that it was the instrumentality of that common understanding and thorough communication which is the precondition of the existence of a

genuine and effective public" (Dewey, 1946, p. 174, emphasis in the original). Thus, to Dewey, there is nothing preventing sciences from being embedded in human concerns, just as there is nothing preventing the ordinary citizen from being educated enough to appreciate the indirect consequences that scientists and experts are grappling with. It is in this relation that we find Dewey's famous shoe analogy, in which he states: "The man that wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied" (Dewey, 1946, p. 207; see also McAfee, 2004). This is what makes democracy a superior institutional arrangement and ties it to a way of life. By providing the space for debate, discussion, and persuasion between democratic masses and experts, it is able to engage in a practice of reflexive self-intervention (Honneth, 1998).

2.4. Revisiting the Lippmann–Dewey Debate

We have seen that Lippmann and Dewey offer fundamentally different views on key themes of democratic politics, generating questions which are still relevant today. What is the status of facts in relation to political judgment, and what follows from the fact that facts are mediated in public? What, then, is a public—a fabrication ultimately reflecting special interests, or an emergent property of an open-ended process of communication? And can we plausibly expect science and scientific expertise to (better) mediate knowledge and democracy? With respect to this last question, however, we also see an interesting convergence. Both Lippmann and Dewey forcefully reject a simple, technocratic fix to the problem of knowledge and democracy. Lippmann's second thoughts on the issue are informed by advances in the hard sciences where quantum physics had shattered the metaphysical belief that Capital-S-Science could provide a singular and stable ground for knowledge production. Dewey (1929) strikes a similar chord in *The Quest for Certainty* and develops a reflexive vision of science as an open-ended communicative process. Epistemologically, this amounts to a rejection of both the distinction between theory and praxis and the Cartesian dualism of *Knowing and the Known* (Dewey & Bentley, 1949). Politically, it suggests that any attempt to know better than the ordinary citizen rests on a knowledge claim which is quite fundamentally out of touch with early 20th-century developments in science. Last but not least, it builds on a processual and relational understanding of politics outlined in Arthur F. Bentley's earlier *The Process of Government* (Bentley, 1908), but it also moves significantly beyond Bentley by redirecting our focus from a given political system to the broader question of the societal conditions of possibility of a democratic organization of social life.

This is to say that the Lippmann–Dewey debate leaves us with an interesting set of unanswered questions. The relationship between knowledge, democracy, and political judgment is always problematic, and it is always subject to practical negotiations. It is practically mediated in and through acts of public communication which always involve both the potential of critical self-transformation and the possibility of misinformation and distortion, for instance in online anti-publics (M. Davis, 2021; for a critique of teleological conceptions of the public see also Herborth, 2023). Reading the Lippmann–Dewey debate as a debate strikes us as productive because it allows us to zoom in on precisely those communicative situations where such practical negotiation takes place. In doing so, it allows us to pose questions which are both open-ended and precise. It allows us to pose open-ended questions because it does not frontload our discussion with substantive a priori knowledge as to how the contentious relationship between knowledge, democracy, and political judgment will play out. And it is precisely because the public has the potential to be both fabrication and emergent property that a focus on communicative negotiation and mediation gives us a specific set of questions. It allows us, for instance, to interrogate social fields such as expertise and

education with a view to how the social relation between rulers and ruled is constituted, enacted, and potentially redescribed. It also allows us to study empirically how the status of scientific and academic knowledge becomes the subject of public contestation when social movements challenge the political status quo. What follows is an attempt to illustrate how questions of this kind can be put to work.

3. Negotiating Democracy and Knowledge: Expertise and Education

In the previous section, we have seen that the Lippmann–Dewey debate not only forms a standard entry into the lexicon of democratic thought, but also continues to inform debates ranging from media and communication studies to political science and political philosophy (e.g., Bjørkdahl, 2024; Bohman, 2010; Carey, 1989). What stands out for the purpose of this contribution is the potential use of the Lippmann–Dewey debate in order to shed light on how the contemporary reading of a crisis of democracy is only insufficiently understood through the lens of post-truth politics. Revisiting the Lippmann–Dewey debate comes for us hence not merely with an archival purpose; it also contributes to a better understanding of our current predicament. As we have seen above, the discourse on post-truth is organized around a set of normative expectations regarding the role science and facts (often simply collapsed into one) ought to play in the public and its politics. These normative expectations are empirically frustrated, and the basic grammar of the post-truth debate seems to simply express exasperation in the light of this empirical frustration. Building on the Lippmann–Dewey debate, we can focus instead on understanding the fundamental political relation between rulers and ruled as a communicative situation. This allows us to raise the question of how this relation is mediated, how it is negotiated, and how the results of such mediation and negotiation have informed the practice and potential of democracy as a mode of social organization (Herborth, 2020). It also allows us to raise this question with regard to any social domain where knowledge hierarchies are at stake, thus extending our discussion of democracy, knowledge, and political judgment beyond the confines of the formally institutionalized political system.

Hence, in this section, we will briefly zoom in on two fields of practice and their associated academic debates as sites where the relationship between rulers and ruled is communicatively produced, mediated, and negotiated. First, we will explore the field of *expertise*. Expertise has been variously hailed as the most promising remedy to the lack of an adequately informed public (debate) or denounced as a form of technocratic usurpation (rule of experts) of the democratic process. It thus expresses the ambiguous relationship between democracy and knowledge in interesting ways. The second part of this section discusses *education* as a field of mediating the relationship between the centre of political power and authority and its subjects. A classical liberal view posits education in general, and political education in particular, as a necessary social precondition of democracy. On this view, education can crucially empower people to meaningfully partake in the democratic process. Sponsoring educational policies from the political centre, however, both imposes qualifications on democratic participation and assumes that the learning outcomes of the process can be set in advance. This contrasts sharply with a democratic view of education as a radically open-ended process from the bottom up, which not only informs the public but plays a crucial role in constituting the public in the first place. In each of these fields, both the relationship between knowledge and democracy and the relationship between rulers and ruled remain contentious. This is to say, however, that it also remains subject to an open-ended process of mediation and negotiation which is itself crucial to democratic practice.

3.1. Expertise

As we have seen above, painting Lippmann as an anti-democratic proponent of the rule of experts does not stand up to scrutiny. He does suggest, however, that for "representative government" to operate effectively in "what is ordinarily called politics, or in industry," it would have to rely on "an independent, expert organization for making the unseen facts intelligible to those who have to make the decisions" (Lippmann, 1922, p. 31). Lippmann (1922, p. 32) thus views experts as curators of public opinion:

> My conclusion is that public opinions must be organized for the press if they are to be sound, not by the press as is the case today. This organization I conceive to be in the first instance the task of a political science that has won its proper place as formulator, in advance of real decision, instead of apologist, critic, or reporter after the decision has been made.

More broadly, in the social and political climate which gave rise to the Lippmann–Dewey debate, there was an intuitive and commonsensical appeal to the notion that expertise had become increasingly important for democratic practice. Alfred Zimmern, known today as an "interwar idealist" in international relations and the first to hold a chair in that newly founded discipline, is an interesting case in point. In a 1930 essay on *Democracy and the Expert,* Zimmern suggests:

> The establishment of a right relationship between Knowledge and Power is the central problem of modern democracy. Upon it, more than upon any other single factor, depends the survival, or, to speak more truly, the realisation of democracy as an effective method for the conduct of public affairs. (Zimmern, 1930, p. 7)

The struggle for democracy, Zimmern (1930, p. 9) argues, had to face the "old 'police state' of the privileged classes" primarily occupied with "the maintenance of order and the protection of property: it required little more than a routine administration." New democratic regimes, however, are confronted with a much wider range of political demands for example in the fields of social security and welfare. Responding to such demands, however, requires expertise: "Thus democracy is faced, at the moment of apparent triumph, with a new danger—that of being displaced by the ruler-class which it has had to call into its councils in order to meet its own special requirements" (Zimmern, 1930, p. 9). For Zimmern and many contemporaries, this could be achieved in particular on the international level and here through the newly established international organizations and, first and foremost, the League of Nations (see, for example, Fosdick, 1924).

Zimmern's remark that the new politics of expertise could flourish more easily in the international realm because it was institutionally less developed remains prescient. It is expressive of a wider trend to articulate what Steffek (2021) has aptly described as "technocratic utopia." The notion of progressive rationalization beyond the nation-state, Steffek suggests, has been expressed predominantly in the mode of a "technocratic internationalism" bent on fulfilling Karl Mannheim's dictum that "the fundamental tendency of all bureaucratic thought is to turn all problems of politics into problems of administration" (Mannheim, 1954, as cited in Steffek, 2021, p. 15). Knowledge resources for the formulation of policy are then supplied by "epistemic communities" wielding expertise over specific issue areas (Haas, 1992). This notion of progressive rationalization also builds the background for dystopian diagnoses of the present, where democratic processes are replaced by public administration and forms of managerialism conducted by experts (Kennedy,

2016; Knafo et al., 2019). Paired with imaginaries of global hierarchy and imbued with hyperbolic forms of modernization theory, this shift towards expert administration can amount to what anthropologist James Ferguson has referred to as an "anti-politics machine" (Ferguson, 1990).

It should not come as a surprise, then, that the contested role of experts has become a crystallization point for the contemporary crisis of democracy. These range from the obvious example of the Covid-19 pandemic to the politics of austerity, or the environmental crisis (more on the latter two below). The ensuing politicization of expertise (and, more broadly, scientific knowledge) is well-documented (Maasen & Weingart, 2006; Nowotny et al., 2001; Sending, 2015; Weingart, 1999; Weingart & Guenther, 2016). What stands out here is how the role of scientific knowledge and expertise can be articulated in radically different ways. Ferguson's anti-politics machine co-exists with anti-science bubbles, and depending on the issue at hand, democracy can only be saved with the help of more, less, or simply different types of expertise. Systematically, for the purpose of our argument, the politics of expertise thus raises the question of how the production and circulation of knowledge is mediated and negotiated at the hierarchical centre of political power.

3.2. Education

Dewey shares Lippmann's basic diagnosis. The practice of democracy and the production and circulation of knowledge are out of joint. However, Dewey takes a decidedly more sceptical stance toward experts, opting instead for a forward-looking exploration of the possibility of popularizing knowledge. Dewey has written extensively and explicitly on education (Dewey, 2019, 1916), but for the purpose of our discussion it is particularly interesting to consider the role of education in his effort to sketch an alternative to the bleak consequences which Lippmann had inferred. The fundamental conceptual problem, Dewey (1946, p. 155) suggests in *The Public and its Problems*, is the tendency to approach social and political concepts from the point of view of an "absolutistic logic." Education is no exception. Notably, education is discussed here not merely or even primarily as a matter of "schooling" but "with respect to all the ways in which communities attempt to shape the disposition and beliefs of their members" (Dewey, 1946, p. 200). Doing so on the basis of the presumption of always already knowing in advance what the outcome ought to be, Dewey (1946, p. 200) contends, is as antithetical to democracy as it is to the logic of inquiry:

> Even when the processes of education do not aim at the unchanged perpetuation of existing institutions, it is assumed that there must be a mental picture of some desired end, personal and social, which is to be attained, and that this conception of a fixed determinate end ought to control educative processes. Reformers share this conviction with conservatives. The disciples of Lenin and Mussolini vie with the captains of capitalistic society in endeavoring to bring about a formation of disposition and ideas which will conduce to a preconceived goal.

Dewey's vision of education as a radically open-ended process of self-transformation thus contrasts sharply with a classical liberal view (see Thompson, 2017), which centres the need to "elevate" the public to a higher level in such a way that the hierarchy of levels must always already be known in advance. Education is so central to classical liberalism that Ryan (2011), in a broadly sympathetic discussion, claims that "to write about [John Stuart] Mill is to write about education." This is indeed so notoriously the case that, as Ryan reports, "Disraeli sneered 'here comes the finishing governess' when Mill entered Parliament in 1866" (Ryan, 2011, p. 653). Liberal hope stands in constant tension, however, with illiberal methods which hypostasize the given

order into a predetermined learning outcome. It is precisely on account of this tension that Mill could advocate "weighted suffrage and elite education" (Jahn, 2005, p. 200) while justifying the political exclusion of lower classes and colonial subjects with reference to their apparent lack of education (see also Hindess, 2007).

This illustrates how, both nationally and internationally, the relationship between democracy and education remains paradoxical. Dewey's emphasis on education as a praxis of reflexive self-transformation remains incisive today precisely because it addresses this paradox. Democracy presupposes particular and demanding forms of knowledge. At the same time, democracy itself can be read as a mode of knowledge production. A democratic organization of social processes will yield epistemic outcomes that otherwise could not have been attained (Estlund, 2012; Goodin & Spiekermann, 2018; Misak, 2008). Against this background, the organization of political education seems both necessary and borderline impossible. It is necessary on account of the diagnosis shared by Lippmann and Dewey: A public without education will fail to be politically effective. And it is borderline impossible because the centralized organization of political education shuts down democracy and education as soon as it imposes learning outcomes on a public which is described as sovereign but treated as an object of intervention (as one can also see in discourses on "social impact," Venzke, 2024; but see also Nøhr & Jensen, 2024). This is not a paradox to be solved here. It can serve, however, as another crystallization point for the contentious relationship between knowledge and democracy. For the purpose of our discussion, this is to say that the politics of (democratic) education raises the question of how the capacity to partake in the production and circulation of knowledge is mediated and negotiated between the centre of political power and the democratic populace.

4. Knowledge and Democracy in Times of Crisis: Anti-Austerity Protests and Scientists for Future

In this section, we briefly discuss two empirical sites where the relationship between knowledge and democracy has emerged as an issue of contention: anti-austerity protests during the eurozone crisis and particularly the European sovereign debt crisis, and the emergence of groups such as Scientists for Future within discussions on climate change and the Anthropocene. Within the scope of this article, we cannot offer a substantive empirical analysis, but we can map controversies (Whatmore, 2009) where the relationship between knowledge and democracy has played out in interestingly different ways, e.g., by countering (anti-austerity) or mobilising (environment) semantics of crisis in an effort to suspend routinized temporalities of democratic decision-making. Both anti-austerity protests and Scientists for Future thus serve as examples of public negotiation and contestation of how knowledge is produced, how it circulates, and how the production and circulation of knowledge become politically relevant.

4.1. Anti-Austerity Protests: Democracy Against Austerity?

The eurozone crisis (also known as the European debt or euro crisis) emerged in late 2009, two years after the global financial crisis. While observers initially assumed that the financial crisis would mainly affect the US and its subprime mortgage market, the crisis eventually spread to the EU. For the three affected non-euro members (Hungary, Latvia, and Romania), the EU and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) created financial support packages already in late 2008 and early 2009. Such measures were not taken for similarly affected countries on the periphery of the eurozone (Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and Spain). In the following years, particularly the Southern European eurozone members experienced a profound

economic—but also political and societal—crisis in the context of extensive austerity policies imposed politically from the centre of the eurozone and justified in terms of economic knowledge. Starting in the mid-2010s, these countries began to recover as austerity measures were gradually eased. Importantly, the crisis led to substantial transformations in the relationship between rulers and ruled, affecting, inter alia, the institutional arrangements of and around the EU, the mobilisation of (economic) expertise, and the role of social movements.

The eurozone crisis shifted decision-making processes within the EU. Interestingly, it did not lead to a shift towards more decisions being made at the supranational level—the European Commission, European Parliament, or European Court of Justice—nor did it bounce back to the national level of member states. Instead, as part of an emerging "new intergovernmentalism" (Bickerton et al., 2015), some of the already existing decision-making bodies were strengthened: The European Council, composed of the heads of state and government, began to meet more frequently; the Eurogroup, an informal forum of euro-area finance ministers, gained centrality; and so did also the European Central Bank (ECB). Additionally, new institutions were established such as the *troika*, which was composed of the European Commission, the ECB, and the IMF. Overall, the crisis saw thus a shift in governance towards an *intergovernmental executive*, also marked by seemingly endless nights of negotiations behind closed doors between austerity-supporting countries like Germany and the Netherlands on one side and Southern European members of the eurozone on the other. During these negotiations, there was a constant feeling that the entire eurozone—or at least the membership of Southern European countries (particularly Greece)—was at stake. It created a sense that urgent action was needed and that there was little room for longer processes of democratic deliberation. The temporality of the financial market was contrasted with that of democracy. Democratic decision-making was considered too slow to cope with ever-accelerating financial markets. In times of crisis, there is just no time for democracy. Moreover, if there are "scientific" laws of the market, there is just no need for democracy. Hence, economic expertise came to play a decisive role.

As is the case with expertise in general, a central dimension of the politics of expertise during the eurozone crisis was to decide who becomes recognized as an expert and what is valued as expertise. Experts and their field of expertise are not pre-determined or "natural" fits. When it comes to the "economy," a variety of groups could be seen as experts. However, during the eurozone crisis, this was narrowed down and boxed predominantly as economic expertise—understood as the expertise of economists (at universities, in think tanks, and in advisory functions at economic organisations). Yet, even there, it became relatively quickly clear that economists do not speak with one voice. Maesse (2018) identifies, for instance, three "camps" within the European austerity discourse: "law-and-order economists," "pragmatists," and "heterodox rebels." The first camp, "law-and-order economists," centred around ideas of neoclassic economics, ordoliberalism, and monetarism. It identified unequal levels of competitiveness as the main cause of the crisis and shared a preference for austerity measures to overcome this. As one of its leading representatives, Sinn (2014, p. 1) stated that the "unresolved problem underlying the financial crisis is the lack of competitiveness of the southern European countries and France." The second, more "pragmatic" camp, favoured a more expansive monetary policy and, at the same time, a consolidation of budgets. This position was common among many IMF and ECB economists, including Mario Draghi. Finally, the "heterodox rebels," represented, for instance, by Yannis Varoufakis, opposed austerity measures and highlighted instead the need to foster GDP growth and focus on employment (Maesse, 2018).

This latter position also informed many anti-austerity protests across (Southern) Europe. A central part of these protests was to shift the discussion from the "necessities" of the market to the consequences of austerity measures "on the ground." This included attempts to reframe anti-austerity protests as "pro-democracy protests" (Flesher Fominaya, 2017). We can therefore read the struggle for and against austerity as an interesting example of how the status of authoritative knowledge claims stands at the centre of political contention.

4.2. Scientists for Future: Knowledge Against Climate Change

Scientists for Future (also known as Scientists4Future or S4F) was initiated by Gregor Hagedorn as a "decentralized, self-organizing grassroot movement" (Scientists for Future, 2019) at the beginning of 2019 through various statements—an initial statement was signed by more than 26,000 scientists (Hagedorn, Loew, et al., 2019)—and letters published in academic journals (Hagedorn, Kalmus, et al., 2019). Moreover, after the summer of the same year, the group adopted a Charter (Scientists for Future, 2019). Scientists for Future's first regional focus was in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, and the idea was to support the "young protestors" (Hagedorn, Kalmus, et al., 2019) of Fridays for Future.

One of the problems for Fridays for Future and similar groups was that they relied on scientific knowledge about climate change while lacking scientific authority to make these claims and related demands. As a protest group, it was essential to eliminate any doubt about the underlying foundations of their demands and thereby counter any form of "green ambivalence" (Rödder & Pavenstädt, 2023; Svensson & Wahlström, 2023), in particular when it comes to the anthropogenetic nature of climate change. This aligned with an imaginary of science as producing irrefutable facts. Scientists for Future seeks to meet the demand to deliver such facts and labels itself as "people who are familiar with scientific work and deeply concerned about the current developments" (Hagedorn, Loew, et al., 2019, p. 81). In this regard, Scientists for Future sees itself as standing above institutions, parties, and disciplines: as a "non-institutional, non-partisan, interdisciplinary association of scientists committed to a sustainable future" (Scientists for Future, 2019).

But what is, according to Scientists for Future, precisely the relationship between knowledge and democracy? What is the role of scientists here? Scientists for Future mobilises in this regard semantics of crisis alerting to the urgency to act: "Time is of the essence," we can read, or, "action must be taken now" (Hagedorn, Loew, et al., 2019, pp. 79–80). While the group acknowledges that it is "important to take time to understand the consequences of political decisions" (Hagedorn, Loew, et al., 2019, p. 84), the urgency of the climate crisis demands immediate action. The following metaphor is illustrative in this regard:

> Experts consulted about a transportation issue may conclude that it would be best to build a bridge of a specified quality at a certain place. The political process may come to a wide variety of conclusions: build no bridge at all, build it elsewhere, or build a cheaper bridge with higher maintenance costs and shorter lifespan. Such decisions justify a critical expert publication, but little more. However, when it is decided to build a bridge that is liable to break in unpredictable ways…a different role for scientists and scholars is called for. (Hagedorn, Loew, et al., 2019, p. 84)

Scientists for Future sees its role mainly in educating the public about the consequences of climate change, something which is also shared by Fridays for Future (Rödder & Pavenstädt, 2023): "Scientists and scholars play

a critical role in knowledge production and application and are called upon to actively feed their knowledge into the public sphere of opinion forming" (Hagedorn, Loew, et al., 2019, p. 84). Still, science and the public are attributed to different spheres. Science informs the public, and the public pressures then politics. In all these operations, communication is perceived as going in one direction: from sender to receiver.

Notably, the way in which democracy becomes problematic operates quite differently here, when compared to the austerity context, as social movements mobilize science—represented by Scientists for Future—in order to counter what they take to be the problematic inertia of democratic politics. It is precisely these differences in how the politics of knowledge plays out that we believe warrant further attention, and it is precisely because the Lippmann–Dewey debate allows us to ask open-ended questions as to what happens with academic knowledge once it enters the fray of public controversy that it makes for a productive analytical lens. Hence, while a post-truth framing would tend to frontload our discussion with preconceptions as to how the politics of knowledge ought to play out, our re-reading of the Lippmann–Dewey debate does not invite pre-constituted answers but helps us to identify different dynamics in how the relationships between rulers and ruled, knowledge and democracy, or politics and truth are articulated.

5. Conclusion

In this article we have argued that the post-truth framing, while intuitively plausible in the face of blatant public misinformation, is ill-equipped to understand the contemporary crisis of democracy. It is ill-equipped to understand the contemporary crisis of democracy because it rests on static and idealizing notions of science, knowledge, and the public. These idealizing notions may serve as a striking contrast to the state of actually existing democracy. By virtue of this contrast, however, they set themselves up for little more than empirical frustration. On this view, the public is not what it used to be, science does not receive the respect it is owed, and the ever-accelerating spread of misinformation cannot but make it worse. As a political intervention, the post-truth framing made sense at a time when the crisis of democracy seemed new and surprising, disrupting liberal-democratic common sense but also read, with liberal hope, as a momentary disruption.

Today, it has become increasingly implausible to read it as a momentary disruption. This invites us to ask difficult questions about the relationship between knowledge and democracy, the production and circulation of knowledge, and how they shape public communication. Revisiting the Lippmann–Dewey debate, we have suggested, provides us with a productive alternative to the post-truth framing because it allows us to zoom in on how knowledge, truth, and politics are practically negotiated. On this view, we need not claim in advance that science does have or ought to have a particular status in relation to politics, or that the common citizenry is or is not epistemically up to speed with the requirements of modern democracy. We can simply ask how the relationship between rulers and ruled is constituted in communicative situations. This is to say that the Lippmann–Dewey debate, with the benefit of a century's hindsight, does not provide us with prefabricated answers to the contemporary crisis of democracy. It does, however, provide us with an interesting set of questions. It does so, in particular, if we read it as a debate and not as a stylized confrontation where the winner is always already known in advance. The point is not to celebrate Dewey as a champion of democracy at the expense of Lippmann's allegedly cynical and technocratic tendencies. Nor is it to dismiss Dewey's emphasis on the possibility of public self-transformation in the light of Lippmann's sober realism. On the contrary, it is precisely because the Lippmann–Dewey debate as debate predates the now firmly institutionalized hard and

fast line between normative and empirical approaches to the study of democracy that it provides us with the tools to interrogate just how the production and circulation of knowledge shapes the public.

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