

Esperti. Come studiarli e perché [Experts. How to study them and why]

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Caselli's work results from a vast and in-depth investigation, both theoretical and empirical, into the interplay between experts, political-administrative institutions, businesses, and the urban social fabric, problematising the relationship between knowledge and power, governance, or public action in the context of a particularly relevant case study: the transformations of urban social policies across the 2008-2018 Italian crisis cycles. His study fills a dearth of attention in the Italian literature on the figure of experts in the welfare system, a key actor, albeit neglected.

The field research, which lasted over a decade, grounds the author's professional experience and social activism on a small association with a marginal role in the social policy sector in the Milanese area. Caselli's observations develop amid a critical discontinuity in the governance and resource system concerning local welfare. Through the exposition of field research – which included observations and interviews with practitioners, operators, consultants and other relevant actors – Caselli describes the changes occurring in the procurement and resource management system of local welfare. His study tracks the emergence of a new *doxa* (i.e., the system of knowledge and values that determines the field's normative boundaries) marked by the “social cohesion” tenders, and accompanied by specific forms of privatisation, financialisation and competition of organisations.

On a more general level, the book summarises the debate on the function of expert knowledge in the social sciences. More specifically, it mobilises the conceptual tools of Critical Sociology and Science and Technology Studies (STS) – namely Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) – to analyse socio-technical devices implemented through expertise. Combining analyses and descriptions with the bourdieusian notion of “field”, it shows how – through the manipulation of calls for tenders, projects, measurement, and evaluation systems – conflicts and hegemonic restructuring of the local welfare field are outlined.

Rather than defining the professional boundaries of the social figure of the expert, Caselli problematises “the emergence, conceptualisation, recognition and practice of an expert function”, which is a:

social action marked by competence, by transgressiveness with respect to both scientific

codes and those of everyday life and by forms of asymmetry of knowledge and power in the relationship with objects and recipients of such competence (p. 25; see also Pellizzoni 2011).

This function exceeds and transfigures the academic one: it is distinguished from pure scientific action by a different and less autonomous relationship with the client, and its status is continuously negotiated through power and market games. Expert's action is also distinguished from "expertise" – as the "ability to perform a given task" – identified not in individual persons or groups or disciplines, but rather in a network that connects experts with customers (either public or private), and the public sphere (Eyal 2013). Thus, framed in its material-discursive concatenations, in its technical, conceptual instrumentation, and in its institutional and spatial operativity, expertise combines theoretical agency (namely production and appropriation of "vehicular ideas", "buzzwords", "knowledge brands") and socio-technical agency (namely production and appropriation of tools for measuring and controlling operational and intellectual resources).

In the evolving context described by Caselli, it is shown how the ability of organisations to dispose of resources and technical-professional knowledge qualified as authoritative, through the mediation of experts (consultants or academics), constitutes a selection mechanism. Indeed, it increasingly became the fundamental condition for access to the new public and private tenders of the Milanese local welfare system. In this way, the asymmetrical status that constitutes and reproduces expertise as a dependency relationship is highlighted and observed from an operational and procedural point of view.

Caselli's research mobilises a wide variety of theoretical approaches, as well as draws on a broad genealogy of social and intellectual struggles in the field of disciplinary institutions (the factory, the asylum, the school, social services). Particularly relevant is the use of the co-production model of expertise networks borrowed from Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as proposed by Vololona Rabeharisoa and Michel Callon, together with a constructivist and institutionalist sensibility.

The book is structured along two parallel layers, juxtaposing reflections on the field notes, discussions on their theoretical framing and the author's personal elaborations.

The first chapter mainly deals with the issue of the asymmetrical nature of expertise according to three models: the classical model of monopoly and closure derived from the sociology of the professions, the conflictual model of critique and reinvention of professional boundaries related to the impact of social movements on disciplinary institutions since the 1960s, and the co-productive model derived from ANT. In this case, Caselli draws on Gil Eyal's (2013) research on the breakdown of disciplinary boundaries as a process that alters the balance between specialist closure and communicational openness in professional cultures, proposing an interpretation that emphasises the relational dimension of expertise.

The second chapter outlines the "field" of local welfare research and consultancy actors (intellectuals and economists), by acknowledging the contribution of social sciences in thematising the relationship between experts and political power. Caselli combines the notion of "field", proposed by Bourdieu (1995) and elaborated by Sapiro (2009), with Gramsci's conception of hegemony, to frame the tensions between the autonomy of the actors that traverse and compose the field itself and the heteronomous (political, economic, bureaucratic) forces that from the outside contribute to shaping its dynamics. What is at stake in the

conflicts is the definitional power of the *doxa* and the conquest of hegemonic positions. In this way, Caselli emphasises the tacit and invisible mechanisms through which the market is structured, exposing the foundation and maintenance of markets to social criticism.

In the third chapter, a specific and emerging aspect of the field of social policies is addressed: the growing diffusion of competition for social entrepreneurship start-ups in the health and social services sector and accompanying the transition from care and assistance targeting those in need to a re-functioning of governance objectives in favour of animation, incentive, empowerment. This transition calls into question consolidated practices promoting some actors and marginalising others. As explained by Caselli, a previous technical-managerial “soft” model, based on the operational control of processes and which is attentive to the content of actions, has been contrasted by a technical-directorial model based on the centrality of expert knowledge in the design and evaluation phases. Crucial to the analysis of these transformations proposed in the book are the Cultural Political Economy (CPE) approaches developed by Bob Jessop and Ngai-Ling Sum (2013). Such a material-semiotic framework combines the elaborations of Gramsci and Foucault, integrating historical materialism and discourse analysis in a common research programme to “identify, in a given crisis phase, the processes of variation, selection and stabilisation of imaginaries” (p. 99). Considerable attention is paid to French-language studies on role reconversion and recuperation processes between militant and professional culture across the local welfare.

The fourth chapter gets to the heart of the deployment of “social cohesion” projects, focusing on the specific role of social workers in the conflicts between the various actors-networks and organisations, and following the constitutive tensions characteristic of project development in labour relations and interpersonal dynamics within organisations. Such dynamics point to the intertwining of the cognitive and normative dimensions of social action, illustrating the relationship between representations and the concrete operational modes of social intervention. Drawing on a theoretical framework that considers governance through instruments, Caselli explores the tensions between actors, interests, and instruments, understood as autonomous agents that shape and direct the behaviour of social actors. Thus, the political dimension of public action is revealed, subtracting it from depoliticisation strategies that tend to obscure it as well as naturalising and destoricising its technical, managerial and economic procedures. The technocratic appearance towards which the narrative of contemporary governance is oriented is thus problematised.

In the fifth chapter, Caselli grasps the relevance of “social impact finance” (p. 143) as a specific research topic, which he develops especially through the sociology of institutions, by focusing on the problems of measuring and exchanging abstract value underlying the construction of the market as a social institution. Caselli juxtaposes the research methods and approaches of STS and, precisely, ANT with the Sociology of Economics and Labour. He outlines some typical dynamics (self-fulfilling prophecies, reactivity and self-disciplining, reverse engineering) that emerge from the observation of tools (such as metrics and measurement standards, management procedures, or information systems and databases that make up the Social Impact Assessment (SIA) and replace previous reporting systems), understood as “actants” with their own degree of autonomy, capable of orienting expectations, enabling behaviour and results of other social actors. This apparatus is mobilised to prepare the ground for

the entry of new financing channels (solidarity finance, social venture capital, impact finance) into the social and community enterprise system and transform its characteristics.

According to the author, the essay highlights, firstly, the dialectical and political dimension of the movements of convergence and divergence, alliances and conflicts, between established and emerging networks of expertise, in the shift towards the financialisation of social enterprise. Secondly, the book exposes the co-evolutionary dynamic between policy paradigms, intervention models and characteristics of networks of expertise in the field of local welfare, which invests value systems, the form and organisation of actors, (economic and extra-economic) interests, funding mechanisms, and public governance tools and devices. Finally, the research provides analytical tools to frame the conflicting and historical nature of institutional procedures, instruments, and governance devices in the field of welfare that appear, or are presented, as neutral or natural. The research fully fits in as an STS contribution to the study of the socio-technical systems intervening in the welfare management system and in the interactions between different actors (public, private and third sector), and different levels (micro and local, meso and organisational, macro and structural). Furthermore, the book addresses some of more neglected and nonetheless relevant aspects, with a considerable degree of depth and breadth, as well as with originality and epistemological and critical awareness.

In this work, the impact of financial crisis on the local welfare funding system, which has been exacerbating since 2010 onwards, is investigated through the transformations of the content of public tenders and competitions. The analysis of the latter, used as a “probe” of the research, allows us to reconstruct an index of the breaks and changes that are crossing the field of local welfare players, in particular the figures that make up the networks of expertise, pointing out the alternations and aggregations/dissolutions between dominant players, groups and networks, and the transformation of their hierarchies. According to Caselli, the pressure exerted by the decrease in national and local funds, both for welfare and scientific research, has opened the way for private actors and made expertise networks with a more markedly entrepreneurial and financial matrix gain space. Symbolic power, entrepreneurial capacity, availability of economic resources and a series of tools – lexical, value-based, technical, and operational – steered these transformations and are the objects of Caselli’s research.

The book is also a contribution to a broader intellectual debate on the controversial and contested role of expert knowledge in the crisis of democratic societies. Indeed, Caselli believes that “a critical and constructivist approach to knowledge, to its production [...] represents a cultural and political proposal” (p. 172), alternative to the two main imaginaries of exit from the contemporary economic-financial and political crisis. Indeed, Caselli’s stance thus rejects both the prospect of strengthening technocratic approaches and non-representative institutions (an “automatic government” of instruments, which would save democracy from the unreasonableness of the masses) and identity-based and authoritarian movements that feed resentment towards elitist powers by recovering a supremacist common sense combined with traditional forms of knowledge and authority.

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