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# Experts and the Will of the People Society, Populism and Science

Harry Collins · Robert Evans  
Darrin Durant · Martin Weinel

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## Experts and the Will of the People

“Collins, Evans, Durant, and Weinel set out convincingly, in crystal clear language, why democracies need experts and expert knowledge. They make a rock solid case for the necessity of communities of experts in democratic societies and for the value of esoteric knowledge developed and nurtured within these communities. In doing so, they strike a blow against the current rise of populism in the political arena and against theories in Science & Technology Studies that treat expert knowledge as undermining of democratic agency. This book brings the ‘Third Wave’ studies of expertise and experience to bear in an impressive way on central problems of political theory that are also matters of urgent public concern as democracies turn toward populism and authoritarianism.”

—Charles Thorpe, Professor, *Sociology and Science Studies, University of California, San Diego*

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# BOOK ABSTRACTS

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION: PLURALIST DEMOCRACY, POPULISM AND EXPERTISE

The rise of populism in the West has led to attacks on scientific expertise. We explain populism through its contrast with pluralist democracy and explain why populists attack scientific expertise. Populism treats the losers at the ballot box and anyone who stands in the way of the government, including scientific experts, as traitors. In contrast, pluralist democracy accommodates minority views by limiting the power of government with ‘checks and balances’. Contemporary science and technology studies (STS) erodes the cultural importance of scientific expertise and, unwittingly supports the rise of populism. STS must re-think the justification of scientific expertise and its role in society without sacrificing its deep insights into the social nature of science; it should no longer simply celebrate the erosion of sciences cultural pre-eminence.

## CHAPTER 2: WHAT IS SOCIETY?

Societies are distinguished by what their citizens take for granted. In ‘Western societies’ most citizens agree, among other things, about the need for regular elections with near-universal franchises, how to treat strangers, the poor and the sick. These understandings are sedimented in the course of socialisation and constitute the *organic face* of societies; there is so much agreement that such things don’t usually feature in political manifestos. Citizens record more detailed, varying, and self-conscious

choices in elections, giving rise to the *enumerative face* of societies. Populism deliberately confuses the enumerative face with the organic face. Citizens can make non-democratic leaders accountable only if they know what democracy means; this is the law of conservation of democracy.

### CHAPTER 3: WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?

There are many forms of democracy. Importantly, is there continual accounting to the public via referendums—‘direct democracy’—or do the people choose representatives who govern relatively independently between elections? It is natural in representative democracy for experts to be consulted by the elected government, whereas if directness is the ideal, experts can look like unaccountable elites. Under ‘pluralist democracy’ governments’ power is limited by institutional ‘checks and balances’, such as the judiciary, the free press and alternative parliamentary chambers, ensuring that minorities and minority opinions are not completely suppressed. Checks and balances require experts. There are many other dimensions of democracies including voting systems and the degree of devolution, but an uncritical advocacy of ‘rule by the people’ is antagonistic to pluralist democracy.

### CHAPTER 4: WHAT IS POPULISM?

Populism contrasts clearly with pluralist democracy. By treating the result of elections as representing ‘the will of the people’, populism misrepresents the enumerative face of society as the organic face and defines all opposition to the elected government as traitorous. Minorities, and the institutions and experts upon which the checks and balance of pluralist democracy depend, are, therefore, attacked by populist leaders. Populist leaders claim that their actions, however dictatorial, and however much they favour a specific group in society, are democratic—they represent the will of the people. Because populism, in its championing of the people, is anti-elitist, some commentators consider it can enliven democracy. In today’s world, however, the dangers are obvious: attacks on minorities and the control of what counts as expertise.

## CHAPTER 5: WHAT IS SCIENCE?

Since the early 1970s, in social studies of science and technology (STS), the ‘logic of scientific discovery’ has been displaced by detailed examinations of science in practice; this has eroded the cultural position of scientific expertise. Furthermore, the ‘crown jewels’ of science, Newtonian physics and the like, are no longer accepted as justifying science’s contribution to citizens’ more diffuse technical concerns. Scientific expertise now seems more fallible, less removed from ordinary decision-making and less insulated from political and social forces. Populist leaders, who attack scientific expertise because it limits their power, can draw on these ideas. STS must stop celebrating the erosion of scientific expertise and, without sacrificing the new insights, rethink the justification for the role of science in democratic societies.

## CHAPTER 6: HOW DOES SCIENCE FIT INTO SOCIETY? THE FRACTAL MODEL

According to Studies of Expertise and Experience (SEE), expertise is socialisation into an expert domain. Society consists of many expert domains of different extent, some small and esoteric, some, like language, large and ubiquitous. Expert domains overlap and are embedded within each other like a fractal. Citizens possess ‘ubiquitous meta-expertise’ which enables them choose domains when seeking expert opinions—such as whether a vaccine is safe. In such cases, citizens must be ready to treat domains of scientific expertise as more valuable than power or celebrity if we are to avoid dystopia and maintain pluralistic democracy with its checks and balances. Democracies depend on their citizens—‘the law of conservation of democracy’; this means we need more civic education to safeguard the future.

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# Introduction: Pluralist Democracy, Populism and Expertise

**Abstract** The rise of populism in the West has led to attacks on scientific expertise. We explain populism through its contrast with pluralist democracy and explain why populists attack scientific expertise. Populism treats the losers at the ballot box and anyone who stands in the way of the government, including scientific experts, as traitors. In contrast, pluralist democracy accommodates minority views by limiting the power of government with ‘checks and balances’. Contemporary science and technology studies (STS) erodes the cultural importance of scientific expertise and unwittingly supports the rise of populism. STS must re-think the justification of scientific expertise and its role in society without sacrificing its deep insights into the social nature of science; it should no longer simply celebrate the erosion of sciences cultural pre-eminence.

**Keywords** Populism • Pluralist democracy • Scientific expertise • Checks and balances • Science and technology studies (STS)

In 1911, to explore the structure of the atom, Rutherford bombarded gold foil with the sub-atomic missiles produced by radioactivity and watched what happened. That’s a good way to investigate the world—an impact can reveal the structure of what is being hit. In social science the idea is known as a ‘breaching experiment’: disturb the smooth running of ordinary life with outrageous behaviour and life’s hidden order shows

itself.<sup>1</sup> We can think of US President, Donald Trump, as engaged in a series of inadvertent breaching experiments and these, along with similar recent shocks in other Western democracies, create an opportunity for a deeper understanding of the political world we inhabit. For example, it has been clearly revealed that the formal constitution of the United States rests on an unwritten constitution. Thanks to Trump's political missiles, we can see that, up to now, the unwritten constitution includes the expectation that presidents will disclose their tax returns, will divest themselves of private business interests, will not appoint unqualified members of their family as senior advisors, will not sack the Director of the FBI at will, will not attack institutions by such actions as appointing opponents of environmental protection to the Environmental Protection Agency, and will refrain from endorsing those accused of child molesting for the US Senate.<sup>2</sup> This election and its aftermath are showing us, anew, how democracy works, or used to work.

## A NEW DEFINITION OF POPULISM

Trump's predations on democratic traditions are often seen as a symptom of 'populism' but, like 'democracy' and many other political terms, populism means different things to different people. Here we are going to put forward a new and simple definition of populism which explains most of what is going on right now in Western democracies. The new definition contrasts populism with a version of democracy which we and others call 'pluralist'. We define populism by its contrast with pluralist democracy and we define pluralist democracy by its contrast with populism. Do you want to understand the rhetoric of Britain's Brexiteers? Do you want to understand what is meant by 'the will of the people'? These definitions do the job. And, crucially, they feed into our explanation of the role of scientific

<sup>1</sup>The classic source for this idea is the work of sociologist Harold Garfinkel (Garfinkel 2011). For instance, he asked students to behave as if they were guests in a hotel when they were at home so as to uncover the normal rules of family life.

<sup>2</sup>Though he does not use the term 'breaching experiment' this argument is the burden of an article by Jonathan Freedland (2017) writing in the *Guardian*. Students of philosophy, sociology and social studies of science should already know that the written constitution is supported by an unwritten constitution since, as the philosopher Wittgenstein (1953) explains, 'rules do not contain the rules for their own application', something that is also evident in sociological studies of bureaucracy (Gouldner 1954). For unwritten norms of American democratic institutions, see Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018, chap. 6).