

### 3. Knowledge and the Political System

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#### 1. Early Modern Politics and the Stratification of Society

Early modern European political systems were based on elite social groups whose members passed down via birthrights the privilege of inhabiting the most important political roles. Elites were prepared for these roles by education; indeed, the 'education of the monarch' and the 'education of the nobility' were distinct literary genres and institutional realities. The transmission of certain types and an adequate amount of knowledge was, of course, part of the educational processes, and the knowledge selected for transmission was considered relevant for the performance of political roles. Nonetheless, knowledge was not a selection criterion for these roles, but rather a complement to the other qualities or qualifications that were attributed to the respective persons on the basis of their birth.

The core educational experience of these elites – monarchs, princes and nobles – was often military education. The military training of elites was usually supported by forms of behavioral education – riding, fencing, dancing – oriented to a way of living centered around bodily practices that combined the military disciplines and the courtly aspect of the world of nobility.

In addition to the social circles who were destined for political roles by birth (in some respects they were 'public personae' who had no private life) there were even in medieval Europe officials and advisors whose main qualification was knowledge – primarily theological and juridical knowledge. Most of these officials and advisors belonged to the same status groups identified by ascription. For them, the learned education they possessed was an upgrading of their status. But scholarship and learning were not a necessary condition for the political influence they were able to exercise. Occasionally, however, persons who lacked high status by birth entered these circles of advisors and high officials, based only on the knowledge they had acquired. Thomas Cromwell (1485-1540), the son of a blacksmith from Putney, who as a young man had fled England (probably having killed somebody) and had learned about law and economy in Italy and the Netherlands and who after returning (around 1515) became for a decade (1530-1540) the most influential advisor of Henry VIII and in many respects in these years the regent of

England is a fascinating example for such an unsuspected rise (MacCulloch 2018; Mantel 2009).

## II. Democratic Inclusion into Observer Roles and the Universalization of Knowledge

The democratic revolution that occurred from the 18th to the 21st century dramatically changed the interrelations between political systems, the conditions of access to political influence and the relevance of knowledge. First, the universality of equal access of everyone to the possibilities of political participation was established during this very long period. Today, there are no longer persons who are by birth destined for political offices (the few remaining monarchs being the obvious exception). Being an active participant in a polity is not an obligation or necessity. But it is an option for everyone. But how is this transition related to knowledge?

First of all, it has to be pointed out, we are speaking about inclusion in public or observer roles (Stichweh 2016). These roles arise in modernity in nearly all function systems, and public/observer roles are the roles for which it is most plausible that they are universalized. Those who hold public/observer roles do not manage the operative core functions of a system (the design and implementation of policies, legislation, administration). The performance of these functions is limited to relatively few participants who specialize in the core roles of a system, which we call performance roles. Because there are many function systems in modern society, it is quite improbable for individuals to manage performance roles in several or all function systems.

In the so-called public roles, an individual is primarily an observer of the system, an observer who, in spite of this restricted status, often has access to the strategic possibilities of intervening into the system. If one looks to the polity as a function system, the interventions that matter for the dynamics of the system are participation in elections and, secondly, the communications and documented opinions that are part of the 'public sphere' and of 'public opinion' (Stichweh 2007). Additional possibilities include all the forms of petitions that are explicitly institutionalized in political systems and the multiple types of political protest, a form of political communication that has expanded enormously in the last decades.

How much and what is an individual expected to know to be able to participate in elections and the public sphere? For centuries, scholars, philosophers, and other actors have asserted that polities need well-informed citizens (Brown 1996; Ferguson 1965; Schütz 1972). This type of normative expectation is reasonable but can only be understood correctly when interpreted in the context of modern political premises. The seemingly unobjectionable wish for well-informed citizens becomes discriminatory when formulated as a necessary condition for participation in a political system. The structural tension of modernity is easily identified: On

the one hand, one may favor expanding secondary schools and higher education, hoping to contribute to the education of well-informed citizens (on the impressive growth of American schooling, see Goldin and Katz 2008). On the other hand, in a modern democracy there is no possibility to deny to those who do not have the knowledge and the education desired the access to forms of political participation. It is self-evident in modern political systems that even analphabets can vote. The expectation to be a well-informed citizen seems to be an ascription. In the act of political inclusion the included person is thought of as a political subject endowed with the necessary knowledge and capabilities.

This modern turn toward inclusion is more easily understood by examining a core argument of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967). Harold Garfinkel has consistently argued that it is not legitimate to distinguish sociologists who are seen as competent interpreters of society from normal members of society who are 'naïve' practitioners of the rule systems of society. Rather, every participant in society is always an observer of society and is, on the basis of managing the rule systems of society on every single day, a competent lay sociologist. Scientific sociology cannot claim any epistemological privileges relative to 'normal' members of society. Sociology is at best an upgrading of competences available to everyone who lives in society. The same argument should be true for the political system: The everyday management of living in society, the capacity for which has been acquired in processes of socialization, should be a sufficient basis to enable persons to contribute knowledge and opinions to political processes. Further, a parallel argument might be made for the understanding of the public sphere. The public sphere is a system formed by the diversity of opinions, the informations and the knowledge stocks to which everyone as a member of society is able to contribute (Stichweh 2007).

The democratic universalization of access to possibilities of political participation and the presupposition that everyone by being a member of a polity is knowledgeable is obviously as counterfactual as it is effective. Given the complexity of society and the complexity of political problems resulting from it, it is clear that the available knowledge of every individual will be insufficient; in some respects it is increasingly insufficient. For this reason it is consistent to postulate an interrelation between political knowledge and the ongoing expansion of school and university education. On the one hand the possession of knowledge is a presupposition that includes everyone. But the diagnosis of a structural prevalence of insufficient knowledge also includes everyone. Educational efforts always deal with these contradictions, and their goal therefore consists in stimulating a reflexive way of handling the distinction of knowledge and ignorance. Democracy, then, is the political system that offers citizens who cultivate such a reflexive approach to the relation of knowledge and ignorance possibilities of participation and influence – even at the level of the public/observer roles of the system.

### III. Performance Roles and Knowledge

As is the case in the other function systems of world society, the political system is characterized by the existence of differentiated performance roles besides the public/observer roles of the system. The operative core functions of a function system are usually entrusted to the performance roles. These roles may be highly professionalized and in these cases a monopolistic control of functions by the profession and the knowledge system it owns arises. In other cases, the core roles may be held by generalists. Under these conditions the emergence of a profession is improbable.

The differentiation between public and performance roles, the ease or difficulty of crossing the boundary between public and performance roles varies across political regimes and is one of the best indicators of the type of regime in a specific country. Authoritarian political regimes (e.g. China, Iran, Saudi-Arabia, North Korea) usually build a boundary between the two role types that cannot be crossed easily. For these regimes, the performance roles are essential to safeguarding those structures that are considered non-negotiable because they are constitutive of the respective regime (e.g. the power of a communist party, the domination of a religious elite of lawyer-clerics, or the prevalence of an ethnically defined group of families)(Ahlers and Stichweh 2019; and Ch. 6 in this volume). The knowledge of the bearers of the respective performance roles is closely connected to the ideological basis of the regime they work for. This connection implies that the quantity and quality of the knowledge they hold depends on whether there is any substantial ideological basis supporting the regime they serve.

Democracies create a more permeable boundary between public/observer roles and performance roles. In democracies, there is a tendency – that varies significantly across countries – toward universal inclusion even in performance roles. The most pronounced case is Switzerland, where the word ‘militia principle’ (‘Milizprinzip’) is common. The term refers to the performance roles of a political system being open to anyone, as is the case with a militia. By this is meant that, as is the case with a militia that any individual can enter at any point in time (without having had a military education). There is no professionalization that functions as a precondition. This implies that there is no specific knowledge system that an individual must master before being allowed to take a performance role. In the case of Switzerland, most political performance roles – e.g. mandates in the national parliament – are only second jobs for those who hold them. These persons are then in their first, professional roles, specialists for the respective knowledge systems. However, the mastery of these knowledge systems is not a condition of accessing the performance roles. This structure, which endows professionals (who are professionals in other function systems) with political performance roles in

which they act as 'amateurs', results at best in a pluralization of the knowledge backgrounds of political personnel.

Thus, in most political systems there is no professionalization of performance roles, at least not in the form of an understanding that there is a specific knowledge base that channels access to political careers (cf. on economists in political roles Hallerberg and Wehner 2018). Instead in many (democratic) political systems another condition of access to political roles has emerged: One must be a member of a political party. For most performance roles in political systems there is a minimum condition that an individual is either a member of or possesses a strong proximity to a political party that is supported by an extensive network of social relations. In many respects, membership in a party has taken over the structural position formerly claimed by social status. Whereas in earlier times an individual was elected because they were well known locally and were influential, in modern systems success in elections is often achieved by being the local representative of a specific political party that has a strong position in the respective city or district. Voters now typically vote for candidates they do not know as persons or do not know a great deal about – this facilitates the emergence of nationwide parties in bigger political systems. The knowledge that individual candidates need under these circumstances is primarily a knowledge of the programmatic and ideological premises of the party for which they stand as a candidate. In sum, rather than acquire genuine knowledge, individuals must be able to flexibly and competently manage the spaces for political movements that are provided by the party, its ideological profile and social embeddedness.

An alternative to this type of structure often emerges where a first-past-the-post system ties access to political performance roles relatively closely to the ability of a person to win an election in a specific constituency. In this case, the individual capabilities of a person and the social connections the person has developed over their lifetime often limit the relevance of the party, which plays only a minor role as a precondition of success in an election and which cannot appoint the seat by an act of political patronage. The set of competences that a candidate needs to be successful is, in this case, highly specific to the respective political system: These competences are related to universal inclusion and to the diversity of the voters in a given constituency. Candidates who want to be successful must be able to handle this diversity among local people and their motives, which may be a demanding task. Again, however, these demands do not entail a 'profession of politics' and thus do not engender a systematized knowledge system on which this profession is based.

These two preconditions – (1) membership and proximity to a political party (and personal competence that can support a career in the party) and (2) the ability to assert oneself in a local election campaign and eventually to win the election – impede the professionalization of performance roles and the subsequent genesis

of an attendant knowledge system. There is a third circumstance that is equally relevant – an idea that comes about, again and again, in attempts to institutionalize approximations to direct democracy. In a direct democracy there should be no exclusive level of performance roles. Those persons whom the voters send to parliaments and constitutional convents are seen as endowed with instructions and not as autonomous representatives (Wood 1998). This is the most radical form of democratic thinking and is clearly incompatible with the professionalization of performance roles and the establishment of a knowledge system controlled by this profession.

#### IV. Experts and the Evolution of Political Problems

Despite these conditions a political system needs experts. This need is related to the type of problems political systems try to work on and try to find a solution for. In present-day society, there are no longer problems that are inherently and without alternatives political. Rather there is a set of relevant problems of society, and the political system claims some of them as belonging to its domain, while leaving others, which it previously claimed as its own, to other actors/systems. These shifts are easily illustrated by reviewing problems such as air pollution, the destruction of the ozone layer, and anthropogenic climate change (Rich 2019; Schubert 2018). Neither society nor the polity could have anticipated that these types of problems would become key questions first for society and then, consequently, for political action. There is no genuine knowledge in political systems that facilitates work on these problems, and universal inclusion in public roles and selection for performance roles conditioned by political ‘Eigenstructures’ (parties, elections) make it improbable that the relevant knowledge will be acquired spontaneously in these processes of the reproduction of political structures. Therefore, the political systems need experts. This is true not only with regard to recently emerging problems but also with regard to classical political problems such as foreign policy. Around 1800 a state such as the newly formed United States had only four or five embassies in other states (Wood 2009), and the staffing of these embassies was at least until 1914 an affair that involved primarily persons of high social status and was not about expertise for the respective country (Clark 2013; Lieven 2015). In contrast, in the contemporary world states support embassies in as many as 200 countries and cannot manage the complexity of this multi-state world without recruiting experts (who are not politicians) on other regions and countries.

Given this context, it is helpful to consider political systems in modern society – and this is probably true for democracies and autocracies – as systems that organize access to knowledge via experts who do not participate in the competitive political processes of selection for performance roles but rather provide knowledge

to the political system. Sometimes experts do this proactively, while in other cases they provide knowledge only on demand.

For this inclusion of experts into the polity there are two main alternatives. One option is to create within the institutions of the political system – e.g. in the staff of parliamentarians, in departments and administrations and in the embassies – performance roles for persons who are not recruited as generalists, as is true for most political personnel, but instead as experts for specific problem domains. These experts are chosen having regard to their proximity to the governing party; consequently, new experts are often recruited when the government changes. These recruits are specialists but have some ties to the programmatic premises of the present government. The second option for the inclusion of experts is consulting individuals who belong to organizations that are not primarily located in the political system, such as research organizations, enterprises, churches, think tanks (McGann 2016), non-governmental organizations and lobbying organizations.

Whereas those experts who are positioned in the administrative apparatus of the state are service providers who move within the intellectual spaces conceded to them by those in core political performance roles, the second group of experts operate as advisers who have no binding commitments to the programs and ideologies of political parties. The political role of the adviser has been prominent in European political systems since the Middle Ages (Stichweh 2006). Whereas in premodern political systems those considered potential advisers were mostly from the same status groups as the monarchs and princes (and therefore were potential competitors), in modern political systems, which do not know comparable status hierarchies, adviser roles are reserved for experts who can claim these roles only on the basis of their acquired knowledge systems. Although historical contexts differ widely in this respect, the societal functions of advisers have remained relatively similar from premodernity until the modern era. Experts provide knowledge and information to the political system, in premodernity on the basis of a combination of high social status with knowledge and in present-day society on the basis of expertise that distinguishes them and motivates their appointment. In stratified society there was a certain pressure built into advice, which arose from the status and autonomous power base of the adviser; monarchs had to deal with this pressure carefully. In modern society, however, the ‘power’ of the adviser is based wholly in the authority of their knowledge system. Advisers are not representatives of a region or locality, but rather represent a knowledge system and its substantive authority.

## V. Autonomous Decision-making: The Genesis of Functionally Autonomous Knowledge-based Expert Organizations

The diversification and multiplication of problems that belong to the domain of political decision-making is closely connected to the differentiation and quantitative growth of the other function systems of society: science, law, religion, economy, education, health and other function systems. In each of these function systems, certain problems and needs for action emerge, some of which will be addressed by the political system or will be claimed by the political system as belonging to its domain. All of these instances entail demands for knowledge for which there are no original knowledge resources internal to the political system.

The political system can draw these problems into its domain, thereby generating an increasing demand for experts who function as advisers for these problems. There is one significant alternative to this solution. The polity can begin to stay out of specific problem domains and transfer decision-making rights to actors from the respective function system and to the experts who act as their representatives or to new institutions that specialize in these problems. The decision spaces opened up in this way still remain political decision spaces as the political system transfers the right to make collectively binding decisions to specific actors and institutions of its choosing – in other words: the political system creates the rights to decide and then endows other actors with these rights. In many of these decision-making processes, the political system distributes resources acquired (via taxes) to the chosen actors and institutions. However, those charged with making the decisions have no classical political legitimacy. They are not selected via elections or (regarding institutions) created by referenda, although they are often chosen by those who owe their performance roles to success in elections and who opt for this kind of political devolution (Tucker 2019; Vibert 2007). In other cases, actors/institutions are recruited or created in self-organization processes within function systems, which are connected to the political system by these decisions and the rights to decide.

There is an increasing number of examples for this autonomization of decision-making within functionally specialized expert organizations, linking function systems among one another (see for an extensive discussion Ch. 5 in this volume). Two classic examples of this shift are central banks and constitutional courts. In both cases, the organization inhabits an intermediary position between the polity and a second function system. Further, in both cases political institutions make central decisions about personnel selection within the autonomous organization. However, these personnel decisions are often the last decisions for which political influence is seen as necessary and legitimate. Once persons have been selected, their terms of office are long (sometimes a life term as in the US

Supreme Court) and from the moment they take office they are free of outside instructions.

The interconnections of decision chains differ from function system to function system and from autonomous institution to autonomous institution. In the case of constitutional courts the distinctive novelty was the judicial review of political lawmaking, which was seen as revolutionary when it arose in the US briefly after 1800 (Wood 2009, Ch. 12). In the case of central banks, economic expertise controls economically relevant parameters (e.g. interest rates) that are perceived as instruments of the political control of an economy. Other cases involve even more complex hierarchies of decision-making, which characteristically includes making decisions about other decisions. In Germany for example, the 'Federal Cartel Office' (an autonomous expert organization established in 1958) controls business mergers; furthermore the 'Monopolies Commission' (an advisory council created in 1973) adds a general evaluation of the state of competition in Germany and in specific situations writes expert reports regarding individual cases without having decision competences. In some cases this functions as a two level structure (decision by the cartel office, recommendation by the monopolies commissions) to which a ministerial decree is added as a third level decision, which can then be examined and potentially revised by a fourth level decision by a law court.

In the 20th and 21st century, in the context of the system/environment relations between the polity and the other function systems, the emergence of autonomous expert organizations is consistent and widespread, leading to a partial shift of the responsibility for making collectively binding decisions from the political system to the respective function system: Such expert organizations include: autonomous universities that are nonetheless state universities; organizations focused on the self-steering of science; organizations that approve and regulate drugs; patent offices connecting the polity, law, science and the economy; organizations for the accreditation of schools and universities; financial auditors; even the 'International Panel on Climate Change'. In some cases final decisions are made by intermediary organizations that are staffed by an equal number of political actors and experts from the respective function systems.<sup>1</sup> Bridges are constantly being built between function systems, thus connecting the polity to knowledge and making the knowledge resources from other function systems available to the polity. The expert organizations that serve as bridges between

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<sup>1</sup> This was the case in the German "Excellence Initiative" in 2019 the participating scientific organizations (National Science Council, DFG/German Research Community) and the international experts tried to reach a demonstrative consensus on the selection of universities and by doing so decisively narrowed the decision space for the final commission which had an equal number of representatives from polity and science.

function system specialize in the selection and condensation of knowledge that is useful for making decisions. The polity creates and tolerates ever-new couplings and bridges that further the access to knowledge. At the same time the polity ensures that the core of the political system is somehow free from the many types of societal knowledge; thus in the core of the system everything centers on politics, and politicians operating in this space have an opportunistic attitude toward knowledge.

## **VI. Center and Periphery: Structures of the Political System and the Localization of Knowledge**

On the basis of the arguments of this text one can draw up a model of the relationship of political systems and knowledge. First, the center of the political system consists of communications and debates by performance roles that participate to a significant amount in the production of the collectively binding decisions that define a polity. In this center, the careers of those who compete for performance roles are structured mainly by elections and parties, and 'success' consists primarily of the ability to prevail in political parties and elections. In the center of a polity defined in this way, knowledge is not of first-order importance. The persons involved must understand parties and voters/elections, but they are mostly generalists rather than specialists, and highly specific expertise is not very helpful and is sometimes perceived as a hindrance.

Beyond this center, there are two peripheries. The first consists of the multiplicity and diversity of individuals who are included via the observer roles within the political system. These individuals either vote or abstain in elections. They are "well-informed citizens" – either by ascription of this status or by really knowing something – and they function as contributors to the public sphere. The public sphere is the biggest distributed knowledge system of a modern political system and its continuous oscillations, which are sometimes barely perceptible, are nonetheless constitutive for the evolutionary dynamics of modern polities.

The second periphery of the political system consists of a large number of experts who contribute knowledge to decision-making processes. In addition to individual experts, this group includes an increasing number of expert organizations that represent, at the boundaries of the system, the functional differentiation of society and that make visible to the polity the extremely diverse knowledge built in the function systems of society. All of these expert organizations are connected to the center of the political system via 'bridging phenomena'. These resulting bridges transport knowledge and ensure a certain amount of participation by political actors in the processes of collective decision-making, the results of which are often attributed as successes or failures to the political actors, too.

This model of a political system with a center and two very different peripheries implies a system that has almost no knowledge within its political core. However, knowledge is otherwise so well embedded in society – via observer/public roles for individuals and via institutions of expertise from multiple function systems – that the non-knowledge of the political center functions as a prerequisite for the existence of flexible linkages to extremely diverse knowledge systems in the function systems of society. The ignorance in the center of the system, which can be interpreted as an absorption by ‘the political’, becomes a condition for a flexible learning competence and the ongoing adaptability of the system in a society that is extremely differentiated and faces an incessantly shifting set of problems.

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