

Contentious Politics of Expertise Experts, Activists and Grassroots Environmentalism

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Abstract

Mobilizations on high-tech projects often become arenas of contention where expertise crosses political and technical claims. One of the aspects of these citizen mobilizations resides in the elaboration of alternative politics linking bottom-up communitarian knowledge with expert advice. This innovation addresses important questions for participation and democracy in general, since expert knowledge indeed maintains a delicate relationship with democratic politics. In this work I aim to analyze how common citizens, political activists and technical experts participate in using expertise, while contributing to making «technical democracy» work. Starting from a dataset of more than 500 episodes of contention regarding high-tech projects, I focus on an in-depth comparative study of mobilizations in the cities of Venice and Florence, given their importance in the rise of the so called «new environmentalism» in Italy. Analyzing four protest campaigns I shed light on the mechanisms of co-production, focusing on 1) the characteristics of bottom-up citizens' expertise, 2) experts' enrollment and their peculiar forms of engagement. In both cities I have selected two cases depending on their variation in terms of technological complexity, conflict intensity and citizens' participation. While in some high-tech projects political conflict and technical controversy tend to be confined to restricted mobilizations – regarding mainly activists and experts – others show high levels of participation and broader knowledge diffusion. Using a contentious politics approach, I investigated the social and political conditions characterizing four protest campaigns regarding different types of high-tech projects. Crossing these two main dimensions – political conditions and technological factors – allowed to look at the role of different expert cultures (professional and disciplinary background) and their interaction/intersection with political cultures (e.g. political ecologist, conservationist, environmentalist). These dimensions helped explain different typologies of expert enrollment, whether its participation is more organic to movement areas (expert-activist) or more episodic and linked to single-issue justifications (expert-ally).

After a careful analysis of the Italian public debate about high-tech projects, a specific media analysis of the four cases in national and local newspapers, a multivariate ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in both cities that included direct attendance

at public meetings, assemblies and demonstrations. Moreover, around 60 in-depth and semi-structured interviews were conducted with public authorities, experts, activists and citizens playing a central role in the mobilization.



Jury:

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Bio

Riccardo Emilio Chesta is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Scuola Normale Superiore. He holds a B.A. in Sociology from the University of Trento, a M.A. in Social Sciences from the EHESS and ENS Paris, and a Ph.D. in Political and Social Sciences from the European University Institute in Florence. He has been Teaching Assistant in Sociological Theory at the University of Trento, Research Assistant for the University of Toulouse and Visiting Scholar at the Urban Democracy Lab, New York University. He is a contributor to *Sociologica. International Journal of Sociological Debates*, and he collaborates with the Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Foundation in Milan. His work has investigated the dilemmas of expertise and political contention focusing on the relations between expertise and activism on large-infrastructural projects and on industrial plants. He is currently working on digital capitalism, industry 4.0 and their consequences for collective action