Abstract
Lafont rightly criticizes the expertocratic shortcut, i.e. the expectation that citizens blindly defer to experts. This shortcut is based on the assumptions that citizens are generally politically ignorant. I will argue that it is necessary to address not only the political ignorance of citizens, but also that of politicians, scientific experts and entrepreneurs. Just like politicians, scientific experts often show political ignorance towards citizens. This is the case if they do not consider the perspective of citizens in politically charged research. Unlike Lafont, I believe that if citizens are expected to blindly defer to politicians, there is no expertocratic shortcut, but a form of authoritarianism that fosters populism. Lafont overlooks an expertocratic shortcut: scientific experts who expect politicians to blindly defer to them, i.e. to accept the agenda they set. It is noteworthy that neither Lafont nor her opponents defending an expertocratic shortcut explicitly discuss the tension between capitalism and democracy. They should do so in order to explain which citizens are ignorant and bypassed, and which are not. The socio-economic inequalities inherent in capitalism correspond to the degree of political interest and participation of citizens. Entrepreneurs are often not only politically ignorant towards citizens, but also towards politicians and scientific experts. Their political ignorance is due to the fact that they are most often in a dominant position where politicians, scientific experts and citizens depend on them. This can be traced back to what I call the neoliberal shortcut: the expectation that actors blindly defer to the markets.

Keywords
commodification of academic research, democracy, expertocratic shortcut, the ideal and the real, the neoliberal shortcut

Although complex societies cannot do without scientific expertise, scientists often face political ignorance and mistrust on the part of citizens, media and politicians. The current coronavirus pandemic shows this well. In the fight against the virus, both authoritarian and democratic societies depend on scientific expertise. Without the knowledge of scientists, politicians would not be able to estimate the possible consequences of their
decisions. Against that background, in my commentary on Cristina Lafont’s excellent book, I would like to focus on the following question: what is the role of scientific expertise in a democracy and what should it be? Lafont focuses in her book on what the role should not be. She rightly criticizes what she calls the expertocratic shortcut, that is, the expectation that citizens blindly defer to experts. This shortcut is based on the assumptions that an epistocracy would lead to better political decisions and that citizens are generally politically ignorant.

One of the great merits of Lafont’s book is that, with the introduction of the concept expertocratic shortcut, she puts her finger on a democratic deficit that must be taken seriously. The point I want to make is that the way she uses this concept does not do justice to its heuristic value. The meaning that Lafont gives to the concept expertocratic shortcut is not differentiated enough to address the complexity of the issues she wants to pinpoint (part I). Moreover, she does not provide sufficient conceptual tools to answer the question why experts and others might bypass citizens (part II). This has consequences for the way the tension between the ideal and the real regarding scientific expertise is conceptualized (part III).

I Towards a more differentiated concept

When Lafont discusses the expertocratic shortcut, she disregards the difference between the relationship that citizens have with politicians and the one they have with experts. It seems that she tars politicians and scientific experts with the same brush. Do scientific experts and politicians not play a different role in society? Wouldn’t a more differentiated view of the expertocratic shortcut require a more nuanced view of political ignorance? I will address both questions.

First, the difference between experts and politicians must be emphasized. Although scientific experts often provide arguments that help politicians to legitimize their political decisions, they follow different rules in their actions. While scientists are judged on whether their truth claims regarding a field of research are justified in accordance with scientific standards (independence, validity, peer review, ethical principles, etc.), elected politicians are judged on whether the political decisions taken are legitimate. If this distinction makes sense, the question is whether Lafont should also distinguish between the expectation to blindly defer to experts and the expectation to blindly defer to politicians. One argument for doing so is that citizens as well as politicians often blindly defer to experts, but not the other way around. Another argument is that research into economic policy shows that politicians often allow experts to determine the decision-making (Hirschi 2018).

Second, it is necessary to bring up not only the political ignorance of the citizens but also that of politicians and scientific experts, because it helps to explain why the latter have an interest in bypassing the former. However, Lafont only addresses the political ignorance of citizens. She could strengthen her plea for a participatory conception of deliberative democracy if she would symmetricize the concept of ignorance by pointing out that politicians and scientific experts also reveal political ignorance and should acquire knowledge about those, mostly citizens, towards whom they are ignorant. The ignorance of politicians can increase citizens’ mistrust of scientific expertise. For
example, when economists in the run up to the 2016 Brexit referendum claimed that leaving the European Union (EU) would have devastating consequences for Britain’s economy, politician Michael Gove said in an interview, ‘The people of this country have had enough of experts’. Just like politicians, scientific experts often show political ignorance towards citizens. This is the case if they do not consider the perspective of citizens in politically charged research (e.g. on pesticides) (Irwin 1995).

The ignorance of citizens, politicians and scientific experts differs from each other, but they have in common that they are political because they touch upon the question to what extent political decisions actually address the concerns of those who are subject to them. When scientific experts expect citizens to blindly defer to them, there is indeed an expertocratic shortcut. But unlike Lafont, I believe that if citizens are expected to blindly defer to politicians, there is no expertocratic shortcut but a form of authoritarianism that fosters populism. However, there is an expertocratic shortcut, which she overlooks, when scientific experts expect politicians to blindly defer to them, that is, to accept the agenda they set.

Ex negativo can now be explained what the role of scientific expertise in a democracy should be. Scientific experts should not be guilty of the expertocratic shortcut and agenda setting. That requires from scientific experts and all other actors involved in processes of political opinion- and will-formation that they try ‘to convince each other of the reasonableness of the policies to which they are subject, instead of forcing each other into blind compliance to those policies’ (Lafont 2019, 168). A source of criticism is the confrontation of the sketched ideal about how the role of scientific expertise should be with reality. By analogy with Habermas’s ([1968] 1973) statement ‘radical criticism of knowledge is possible only as theory of society’ (p. 9), I would argue that without a theory of the world society that focuses on the changed role of scientific expertise, any criticism of blind deference and political ignorance would be wide of the mark.

II Scientific expertise in a democracy

There is an important change in the worldwide production of scientific knowledge that explains why politicians have an interest in an expertocratic shortcut. According to Gibbons et al. (1994), in the last decades of the 20th century, a heteronomous mode-2 science developed alongside an autonomous mode-1 science. The relative autonomy of mode-1 science is based on a disciplinary organized quality control by the academic community. The self-understanding of scientists is that they produce knowledge that others (politicians, entrepreneurs, etc.) may use to attain their ends. Mode-2 science is heteronomous because the production of knowledge is organized interdisciplinary and actors from social domains other than the scientific domain are also involved. Because in this case the production of knowledge is more explicitly aimed at the application of scientific expertise, besides scientists, other stakeholders are involved in assessing a research project. In practice, this leads to all kinds of tensions among and between scientists, politicians, entrepreneurs and citizens. For example, the coronavirus pandemic once again shows that scientific experts compete to obtain scarce research funding. Entrepreneurs in the medical world compete to get money from the national
government or the EU to develop a vaccine so that they could potentially earn a lot of money.

Mode-1 science may not have disappeared, but mode-2 science has gained enormous ground. This includes another development that is crucial for understanding the expertocratic shortcut: the commodification of academic research (Radder 2010). This development is due to the fact that scientific knowledge has become more and more a commodity which must be sold at the best possible price. That triggers scientific experts, especially in the field of medicine, to manipulate data in order to meet the wishes of those on whose behalf they conduct research (Goldacre 2012).

This very briefly identified context in which the relations between politicians, citizens, scientific experts and entrepreneurs must be situated makes it clear that capitalism leaves a big mark on it. It is noteworthy that neither Lafont nor her opponents defending an expertocratic shortcut explicitly discuss the tension between capitalism and democracy. They should do so because it addresses a question relevant to their controversy: which citizens are ignorant and bypassed, and which are not? The socio-economic inequalities inherent in capitalism correspond to the degree of political interest and participation of citizens (Schäfer 2015). The blind deference of citizens is limited to a part of the citizenry that does not vote or articulates its anger at political elites who are politically ignorant towards them by voting for a populist party.

III The ideal and the real

By confronting the actual role of scientific expertise with how it should be, I want to give more cachet to the concept of expertocratic shortcut introduced by Lafont. Ideally, scientific experts provide citizens with knowledge that contributes to their political opinion- and will-formation and their quality of life. It is obvious to give citizens a voice because of the consequences that the application of scientific research (for instance genetic engineering) can have for them. According to Kitcher (2001), it is important that they have a say in whether the truth about a particular subject is significant (pp. 105–11). Finding the truth is especially meaningful when it serves the common good. Citizens must determine the epistemic significance of research through democratic procedures and public deliberation. Kitcher points out an interesting problem that for some is an argument in favour of the expertocratic shortcut. Suppose scientific experts discover a problem that citizens fail to perceive. In that case, citizens might qualify research as insignificant. The temptation to bypass them may be great. Citizens can indeed be ignorant of the negative consequences that the measures of politicians or the lack thereof have for them and their (grand)children. In order to avoid an expertocratic shortcut in this case, Kitcher and other scholars rightly suggest generating public knowledge. However, neoliberal policy leads to the further commodification of scientific research and undermines the generation of knowledge that serves the common interest.

Ideally, the markets where entrepreneurs are the main actors provide citizens with decent work and consumer goods that sufficiently satisfy their needs. Reality looks different because of capitalism. For many citizens entering the labour market, decent work is out of the question, because they have to work under poor working conditions (Aleksynska et al. 2019). Some entrepreneurs violate the privacy of citizens by
collecting unsolicited data about them in order to influence their consumer behaviour (Zuboff 2019). Entrepreneurs are often politically ignorant not only towards citizens but also towards politicians and scientific experts. Their political ignorance is due to the fact that they are most often in a dominant position where politicians, scientific experts and citizens depend on them. This can be traced back to what I call the neoliberal shortcut: the expectation that actors blindly defer to the markets.

In my comments, I have tried to shed a different light on the expertocratic shortcut by not addressing the legal world, like Lafont, but the scientific world. Instead of focusing on the judicial review, I focused on what the role of scientific expertise in a democracy is and should be. By studying what this role is, it becomes clear that political ignorance is not, as Lafont suggests, limited to citizens but can also be found among politicians, entrepreneurs and scientific experts. Moreover, it has become clear that the expertocratic shortcut concerns not only the relationship between scientific experts and citizens but also the relationship between scientific experts and politicians. Public knowledge is only part of the solution to the democratic deficit inherent in the expertocratic shortcut. Because of the commodification of scientific research and what I call the neoliberal shortcut, the development of public knowledge, based on public deliberation and mutual justification, is difficult. So as an ideal, public knowledge is a lofty goal, but its value is not diminished if it is difficult to achieve.

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