Review of Littoz-Monnet, A. (2020) Governing through expertise: the politics of bioethics
Christensen, J.

Citation
Christensen, J. (2021). Review of Littoz-Monnet, A. (2020) Governing through expertise: the politics of bioethics. *Swiss Political Science Review*, *27*(3), 685-688. doi:10.1111/spsr.12473

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)
License: Leiden University Non-exclusive license
Downloaded from: https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3486527

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Christensen, Johan. 2021. ‘Governing through Expertise. The Politics of Bioethics. Littoz-Monnet, Annabelle. Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press (2020), 161 p., ISBN 978-1-108-84392-8’, *Swiss Political Science Review* 27(3):685-688.

Book review:

Governing through Expertise. The Politics of Bioethics

Littoz-Monnet, Annabelle

Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press (2020), 161 p., ISBN 978-1-108-84392-8

A common view has it that while questions of fact are often left to experts, value questions are the preserve of democratic politics. In *Governing through Expertise: The Politics of Bioethics*, Annabelle Littoz-Monnet shows that this is not always the case. “[E]ven when questions of ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ have been central in political debates,” she argues, “we can observe the ubiquitous role of experts” (p. 2). Her book traces the fascinating rise of a new class of experts in national and international governance, namely ‘ethics experts’ or ‘bioethics experts’. In the last half-century, numerous countries and international organizations have established ethics advisory bodies, including national councils on medical ethics and the EU’s European Group on Ethics (EGE). These bodies are called upon to examine thorny ethical questions arising from stem-cell research, nano-technology, artificial intelligence or, most recently, the distribution of vaccines. Ethics experts – who may hail from the life sciences, philosophy, law or even theology – have come to assert authority over these policy issues based on their special training and knowledge about moral questions and claim to represent a diversity of viewpoints. Yet, Littoz-Monnet makes the case that rather than contributing to more ethically informed or democratic policy-making, the reliance on ethics experts for advice has served as a convenient way for

policy-makers to defuse political conflict, sideline dissenting voices and push through pro-science and innovation policies.

The book is targeted at scholars with an interest in the role of expertise in public policy-making in general, and within European and international governance in particular. It will also be of interest to practitioners in the field. The book's argument is located within the burgeoning literature on the relationship between knowledge and politics. In existing work, there are two competing views of this relationship. On the one hand, political scientists and international relations scholars have argued that since decision-makers depend on experts to understand complex policy problems and assess the consequences of different courses of action, expert communities may have considerable influence over policy (see e.g. Haas 1992). On the other hand, scholars within science and technology studies (STS) have argued that all knowledge is political. Scientific knowledge production is shaped by the social and political context and thus not independent from political interests. While Littoz-Monnet takes the latter perspective, she also offers some valuable criticisms of the STS approach. First, she observes that while "the relationship between knowledge and politics is entangled, … agency, contestation and conflict remain possible" (p. 11). Second, she argues that studies need to go beyond abstract arguments about the macro-level interactions between science and politics, and focus instead on capturing "the contingent interactions between knowledge and politics at the meso-level analysis of policy processes, in which actors and conflict … are central" (p. 27). That is, how exactly do policy-makers mobilize expert knowledge?

Littoz-Monnet thereby highlights an important research agenda concerning the *politics of expert advice*. Studies of expertise and policy-making constantly repeat the argument that expert knowledge can be used politically and strategically, yet they very rarely examine the specific mechanisms through which expert knowledge is controlled or used by policy-makers (see Hesstvedt 2020; Hesstvedt and Christensen 2021). Littoz-Monnet proposes three

mechanisms through which expert advice is brought into line with the wishes of policy-makers: 'orchestration', which entails that policy-makers seek to influence the content of expert advice for instance by selecting specific experts or framing questions to advice bodies in narrow ways; 'ideational alignment', which refers to how policy-makers and experts come to share the same ideas through repeated interaction in meetings and conferences; and 'calibration', namely that experts tailor their advice to what is politically feasible. This typology, which is developed based on inductive case study work and theoretical reflection, is presented as the main theoretical novelty of the book and therefore deserves some critical attention.

Although the mechanisms are clearly presented and easy to grasp, a first objection is that none of them are particularly new. What is called orchestration is essentially a restatement of a principal-agent argument: policy-makers strategically seek to control the experts they consult to make sure that expert advice does not diverge from the preferences of policy-makers. Yet, the author does not acknowledge this, nor does she anchor this mechanism in any other relevant literature. Given how central this mechanism is to the argument of the book, it could surely have been given a firmer theoretical basis. For instance, in a recent study conducted together with Stine Hesstvedt, we theorize the different ways in which politicians and bureaucrats seek to control expert advisory bodies from a principal-agent perspective (Hesstvedt and Christensen 2021). Similarly, the argument about ideational alignment through interaction mirrors standard arguments in the literature about the diffusion of ideas and discourses. That experts advising government calibrate their advice to make it useful for policy-makers and reach consensus also seems unsurprising.

Second, the different mechanisms do not seem entirely theoretically consistent. Rather, they appear to rest on different assumptions about human behavior. Whereas the orchestration logic assumes rational and strategic actors, the ideational alignment and calibration mechanisms seem to assume that behavior is shaped by socially constructed ideas and norms about

appropriate behavior. There are of course ways in which strategic and idea-driven action may be reconciled theoretically. Yet, the author does not spell out the underlying theoretical assumptions of her argument or seek to resolve this apparent contradiction. This creates some confusion in the empirical narrative, where the author jumps back and forth between strategic and norm-driven interpretations of the behavior of the main actors.

In its empirical part, the book offers a close-up analysis of the politics of expert advice on bioethics in the EU. The analysis zooms in on the relationship between European Commission policy-makers and the EU's ethics advisory body – the European Group on Ethics (EGE) – in policy processes concerning stem cell research, nano-technology and data protection. The findings from the three case studies are mostly the same: the policy process was driven by the Commission, which had clear policy preferences and strategically used the ethics advisory body to bypass political conflict, whereas ethics experts were subservient to these political goals and provided advice that legitimized rather than challenged the Commission's agenda. In other words, policy-makers dominated and used experts.

Although the empirical narrative traces these policy processes in considerable detail, the analysis comes across as rather one-sided. Despite the author's promise to consider agency, conflict and contingency in the expert-policymaker relationship, there is very little conflict in the narrative and the only actors allowed any agency are policy-makers. Whereas European Commission bureaucrats are presented as resourceful and strategic actors animated by a pro-science master plan, ethics experts are portrayed as little more than useful idiots. The EU's ethics advisors do not have independent ideas or preferences, they do not possess any special knowledge they can use to gain influence, and they do not pursue their preferences in strategic ways. Instead, experts are controlled four times over: not only is the discipline of bioethics shaped by the dominant pro-innovation governance regime, ethics advisors are also influenced by the ideas of policy-makers, hamstrung in their advice-giving activities and liable to self-

censor to please policy-makers. The conclusion is that ethics experts have no autonomy and are simply the product of the political regime they operate within. Yet, one does wonder whether this conclusion simply follows from the author's STS perspective or whether it could conceivably have been falsified based on the empirical evidence. Allowing for the possibility that experts have autonomy and agency could have made for a more balanced and convincing account.

In terms of proving the argument, the research design could also have been more effective. The three policy processes examined provide very little variation in outcomes or explanatory factors. This makes it difficult to determine whether the specific mechanisms were indeed decisive in bringing experts into line and producing a specific policy outcome. Would the absence of one or more of these factors have resulted in a different outcome? Finally, studying the politics of ethics expertise in the context of the EU allows the author to examine policy processes of great societal and scholarly interest, including high-profile issues such as data protection. Yet, the EU is arguably also a 'most likely case' for depoliticization through expertise. This raises the question of how well the findings would travel to national cases of the role of ethics experts in governance.

Johan Christensen

Leiden University, Institute of Public Administration

References

Haas, P.M. 1992. Introduction: epistemic communities and international policy coordination, *International Organization*, 46(1): 1–35. DOI: 10.1017/S0020818300001442

Hesstvedt, S. 2020. *The politics of expert advice. A study of governments' use of policy advisory commissions in Norway, 1972-2018*. PhD dissertation. Oslo: University of Oslo, Department of Sociology and Human Geography.

Hesstvedt, S. and Christensen, J. 2021. 'Political and administrative control of expert groups – A mixed-methods study', *Governance* (early view). DOI: 10.1111/gove.12599