



Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:
DURANT, D

Title:
Collins on Experts: Gangnum Style STS

Date:
2016

Citation:
DURANT, D. (2016). Collins on Experts: Gangnum Style STS. *Metascience*, 25 (1), pp.119-124. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11016-015-0025-x>.

Persistent Link:
<https://hdl.handle.net/11343/58835>

Collins on Experts: Gangnam Style STS

Harry Collins, *Are We All Scientific Experts Now?* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014. 140pp.

\$64.95HB

Review by Darrin Durant

School of Historical and Philosophical Studies

757 Swanston Street, Building 199

The University of Melbourne

Parkville 3010 VIC Australia

E-mail: ddurant@unimelb.edu.au

Like a rock star that released that one album too many, Harry Collins' *Are We All Scientific Experts Now?* has been met with a lukewarm reception by many in his established fan base in the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS). Analogous to not buying the album, many in STS are refusing to whistle to the tune that Collins sings on the final page of the book. "We should", says Collins, "start the zeitgeist moving in the other direction and learn, once more, to elevate science to a special position in our society" (132). The zeitgeist - or spirit of the age - that is in question is the idea that because "there is nothing so special about science" (26) we should (on pain of being anti-democratic) maximize the role of ordinary citizens in deciding

social issues that involve technical knowledge (43-46). Collins' glorious attempt to turn the beat around begins by rejecting the veneration of ordinariness, which Collins treats as striking the wrong chord in response to the discovery that science is not infallible. "Default expertise" (15) is the sense of empowerment ordinary citizens feel when they infer from such fallibility that they are "as good as an expert because there are no experts" (16). *Are We All Scientific Experts Now?* poses a clear question in response to this possible cacophony of default expertise, and articulates a trick essential to answering that question. Along the way, Collins shows himself to be as unfashionably out-of-sync with "the state of the world" (Jasanoff 2003, 397) as his critics charge. But if you listen closely, what emerges from Collins' mixing of traditions is not one album too many, but a new classic, a kind of Gangnam Style STS.

Let us start with Collins' so-called 'third wave', originally asking "how far should participation in technical decision-making extend" and, given the fallibility of science, what can be the "rationale for the expansion of expertise" (Collins and Evans 2002, 237). While Collins and Evans' follow-up *Rethinking Expertise* (2007) was a broad sociological reconstruction of expertise, *Are We All Scientific Experts Now?* asks a narrower question. It is a "vital question", Collins correctly notes, "whether ordinary citizens can really make scientific and technological decisions that are as good as, or better than, those made by scientists and technologists" (16). The elephant in the room here is Brian Wynne's (2003) early critique of the third wave, which makes this narrow question sound like picking up the wrong instrument and being off key from the start. Wynne claimed that the issue of technical legitimacy was being reduced to a battle about "who should decide propositional truths" (Wynne 2003, 408), apparently in ignorance of the way "the negotiation of public meanings" (Wynne 2003, 404) and the way they are "not

problematized, but presumed and imposed” (Wynne 2003, 404) is at the heart of issues of technical legitimacy. Wynne’s worries remain evident in a recent complaint that public meanings are often subordinated to and thus deleted by scientific definitions of social problems involving science, suggesting a continued “lack of serious attention to [the] political problem of scientism” (Wynne 2014, 64).

Unfortunately for Wynne’s critique, it seems a case of constructing a straw man to symbolically trounce in order to increase the perception of novelty. Collins is not as scientific as Wynne needs him to be to support the reading of the third wave as focused on propositional knowledge claims to the exclusion of public meanings. Collins and Evans (2003, pp. 439-440) admit to a form of scientism, that science is a part of our culture and not just a resource, but they otherwise agree with Wynne’s critique of scientists making ex cathedra judgments. So while Collins is clearly investigating whether ordinary citizens and experts are on the same technical footing, that question is not embedded in some neglect of context or public meanings. Instead, Collins’ “vital question” (16) is embedded in an effort to develop a richly textured notion of expertise that uses categorizations to illuminate different skills and their different social basis, while theorizing a role for expertise in our political processes that hinges on values, aspirations and norms rather than truth. There is ultimately a ‘trick’ to answering the vital question, which invokes a constructivist image of science but asks how that science so-described can be part of our culture and not just a resource. “The trick that has to be learned”, notes Collins, “is to treat science as special without telling fairy stories about it” (81).

Collins aims to avoid fairy tales by dismissing the notion that experts acquire truths via some special communion with nature. Rather, Collins offers a more sociological grounded account. Scientists “are still special in terms of the values that drive their lives and their aspirations in respect of how they live their lives” (124). But were not Merton’s norms also fairy tales? Collins replies that it is the aspiration that counts when considering the role of norms (127-128). The aspiration to be universalistic, to support organized scepticism, and be disinterested; norms which Collins endorses and adds to by discussing honesty, sincerity, and the virtues of being closer to the system of knowledge production when it comes to reliable judgment. Collins touches on a host of empirical examples, with one featuring prominently and illustrating Collins’ general themes. In 2009 when Climategate hit the headlines, ordinary citizens were exposed to the inner workings of science, via hacked emails going viral. If we are asking whether we are all scientific experts now, Climategate is indicative of a trend: “what happens inside science has become more visible to the citizen ... Science’s old image could never survive the examination, and when an idol falls it always invites a reaction” (14).

A widely reported comment from those hacked emails has Phil Jones writing that “I’ve just completed Mike’s Nature trick of adding in the real temps to each series for the last 20 years (i.e., from 1981 onwards) and from 1961 for Keith’s to hide the decline” (cited 89). The trick turns out to be, not some deliberate deception, but a technique for “accomplishing some technical transformation, while the ‘decline’ was in tree rings and not temperature” (90). Collins’ sociologically grounded account of the specialness of science comes home to roost here, because Climategate illustrates “why it is hard to make useful specialist judgments without possessing the tacit knowledge that comes with being a member of the expert

community” (91). Collins eschews the temptation to treat expertise in attributional terms because, despite such ascetic methodological sensibilities being a recipe for generating academic work (endless case studies), Collins wants to show how we might contribute to helping resolve disputes in real-time. Categorizing expertise in advance of contestation helps Collins explore the implications of not being an insider. The categorization is represented in Table 2.1 on page 62, a simplified table of expertise. “The most important division in the whole book”, Collins admits, is the “vertical line that separates primary source knowledge from interactional expertise” (96). In the Climategate case, the categorization allows Collins to show that citizens exposed to the primary source knowledge revealed in the hacked emails nevertheless lacked interactional expertise. The word ‘trick’ was misinterpreted, with a specific consequence being to enable a process whereby a political judgment about trustworthiness was “transmuted” into a technical judgment that global warming was unrelated to human activity (88). More generally, the episode showed that “one cannot ... know what [the hacked discourse] means without being an insider” (96).

Like any categorization, it is probably more fruitful to be mildly tolerant of simplifying assumptions rather than aim for methodological purity. Similarly if we dismiss Mertonian sociology as a quaint relic, we might miss the wood for the trees. For instance, “why are we so offended when we find that scientists have been bribed by the tobacco and oil companies to produce bespoke findings tailored to fit the company’s financial interests” (82)? Possibly because wave one of science studies was “not so far out in its respect for the norms and values of science” (p. 82). Here we see that Collins is doing more than just telling grounded stories for why it might be sensible to choose the judgment of an interactional or contributory expert over

a default expert. Collins also opens up the debate about what constitutes fairy tales about science. Utilizing the “broad brush” (20) of STS living through three waves, Collins suggests that while everyone knows wave one told fairy tales we are only now seeing that wave two tells them too. Of course critics think wave three is the fairy tale. Wynne thus suggested the third wave was actually a return to the first wave (Wynne 2003, 403), and Jasanoff labelled the third wave a regressive “drawing in of the horns” that shifted back from the “worldwide movement” embracing “wider participation” in decision-making (Jasanoff 2003, 390 and 397).

In this book Collins returns serve, asking whether his critics are representative of an academic culture more concerned to “serve the zeitgeist, rather than question it” (45). But how could wave two be telling fairy tales? Collins might be on more interesting footing here than his critics are prepared to admit. Replaying the Climategate example, Collins takes aim at Hulme and Ravetz, who inferred from the episode the need for scientists to “show their working” and for science to be “publicly owned” (97). Collins replies that both are “impossible” (97), because the former assumes insider tacit knowledge can be known in the absence of lived experience and the latter would require gaining interactional expertise (which is sociologically like an apprenticeship) across multiple fields. The footing for Collins’ implication that wave two is telling fairy tales is that Collins’ theoretical reconstruction of expertise more fully continues the STS tradition of theorizing science, whereas his critics often fall back to a quite positivist (or wave one) reaction. When Hulme and Ravetz demanded scientists ‘show their working’ they were treating scientists as proto STS investigators, following Jasanoff’s characterization of STS workers as involved in showing the “irreducible sociality of science” (Jasanoff 2003, 392). Of course empirically demonstrating the irreducible sociality of science is the hard task (versus just

repeating that theoretical mantra). But Collins' critics often act as if all that matters is empirically scurrying about after the next exposé of the inside workings of science; the next Nanogate, or GMOgate, or Vaccinationgate. Indeed a 2011 forum on the third wave in *Critical Policy Studies* (Vol. 5, No. 3) saw critics coalesce on the need to resolve normative debates about the politics of expertise by letting the data decide (more empirical case studies). Ironically it was classical positivism that gave priority to data and treated theory as instrumental.

What might be wrong with demanding scientists show their working and that science be publicly owned? If you consider Dreyfus and Dreyfus' (cf. 2005) classical account of skill acquisition as a series of cognitive and emotional changes acquired in apprentice-like interactive social conditions, it becomes immediately apparent that Collins' emphasis upon tacit knowledge connects up with broader theorizing about the limits of human articulation. Or consider Shapin's account of the credibility-economies of science (cf. 1994, 409-417), which is at pains to reiterate the importance of trust and forms of face-to-face engagement in knowledge acquisition and dissemination (whether seventeenth century or modern science). Or Warren's (cf. 1996) account of the confronting and often unpleasant nature of engaging diverse polities in a democracy. Collins' account of interactional expertise points to the massively demanding character of the interactional expertise that would be behind public ownership of science. Sometimes you do not need a case study to tell you what multiple and ultimately overlapping social theories are able to tell you. Not that democratizing expertise might be implausible, but that Collins' emphasis upon the limits of ourselves and our institutions is interestingly backed up by broader social theorizing.

Of course we can all choose to limit our diet of theory to the latest STS handbook, and we can ideologically plump for the solution to the problems of participation being more participation. But Collins' subtly mixed-traditions book poses a deep challenge to wave two, which has been right to deny that science is special by virtue of mirroring nature (26), and right to adopt symmetrical explanations (28), and correct that the so-called scientific priests were not so holy after all (81). But wave two might have went too far to the extent it 'levelled the cultural plain and eroded "mount science"' (123). We need wave three, suggests Collins, because we need to make fine-grained distinctions and discriminations if we are going to make wise judgments about how expertise should feed into contested policy domains. We are all experts now in the following senses (115-120): we have ubiquitous expertise by virtue of living in societies, specialist expertise by virtue of working for a living, and meta-expertise because of either ubiquitous social skills or more local forms of discrimination based on close involvement. But we are not all scientific experts now in the sense that, lacking interactional expertise, our ubiquitous expertise cannot bridge the outsider-insider gap. Nor are we all scientific experts now in the sense that, once a person has acquired a specialist expertise, they are not actually 'all of us' but elites (117). Collins makes this point across some classic case studies, like Wynne's sheep farmers and Epstein's AIDS activists: the so-called lay expert has actually moved from ordinary citizen to technical elite in their domains of social action.

Possibly due to the spirit of our times, Collins has to rebut accusations of scientism. So Collins writes that "we know that we can never go back to the 1950s where the pronouncements of any scientist in a white coat was taken as authoritative, not only on the science, but also on any policy-related issue" (86). Collins is not a fan of such ideas, because it is

proper that “democratic politics always trumps scientific conclusions” (86). But Collins is a bit old-fashioned, in an admirable sense, having not given up on the ideal of science as a source of social good. Reviewing the travesty of Mbeki’s South Africa banning the HIV retro-viral drug AZT, Collins notes both the broader debate about public meanings and the overwhelming scientific consensus that the drug was safe. “That scientific view”, suggests Collins, “should not bind the policymaker but it should have been taken into account and fairly presented” (101). Here we have a tension with no easy resolution, because the boundary between taking into account and being some kind of binding is pregnant with normative import. For instance, leaving expertise to blow in the political winds threatens – for Collins - a situation where “it will be those with power to enforce their ideas or those with the most media appeal who will make our truths” (131).

Though it is a story for another day, in my judgment Collins’ book is the heir to the sociological tradition represented by Alvin Gouldner. Toward the end of the 1960s Gouldner criticized Howard Becker for operating a ‘sociology of cool’ that recognized and represented the marginalized underdogs at the expense of making them even more vulnerable to those in a position to use the case study revelations about their lifeworlds. Collins is sensitive to what happens when you unwittingly disempower expertise, such as fuelling the manufacture of doubt to protect profits. It is in this broad normative sense that Collins is on interesting footing in his implication that it is wave two telling fairy tales about the politics of expertise. Because Collins’ critics have merrily indulged themselves implying his hits are behind him, the most entertaining concluding thought is to wonder if Collins’ third wave might outgrow its quirky beginnings and show the joke to be on the critics. Like the South Korean musician Psy, whose

song 'Gangnam Style' became a Youtube sensation in 2012 because, not in spite, of its oddball mix of musical and dance traditions, Collins' third wave (as noted above) blends into an oddball but powerful mix of (culture-commentary) traditions. Note too that Psy claimed an emperor-has-no clothes kind of motivation: "people who are actually from Gangnam never proclaim that they are – its only the posers and wannabes that put on these airs and say that they are 'Gangnam Style' – so this song is actually poking fun at those kinds of people who are trying very hard to be something that they're not" (Cha, 2012). Similarly, Collins is against default expertise. To the extent we might come to witness a reaction against the fallen idol of everyone thinking they are an expert, *Are We All Scientific Experts Now?* might come to be a classic, a Gangnam Style shot across the STS bow.

References

- Cha, F. 17 August 2012. Interview: PSY on 'Gangnam Style', posers and that hysterical little boy. *CNN*.
- Collins, H.M and Evans, R. 2002. The Third Wave of Science Studies: Studies of Expertise and Experience. *Social Studies of Science* 32(2): 235–296.
- Collins, H.M and Evans, R. 2007. *Rethinking Expertise*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dreyfus, H.L. and Dreyfus, S.E. 2005. Expertise in Real World Contexts. *Organization Studies* 26(5): 779-792.

Jasanoff, S. 2003. Breaking the waves in science studies. *Social studies of science* 33(3): 389–400.

Shapin, S. 1994. *A Social History of Truth*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Warren, M. 1996. What should we expect from democracy? Radically democratic responses to politics. *Political Theory* 24(2): 241-270.

Wynne, B. 2003. Seasick on third wave: subverting the hegemony of propositionalism. *Social Studies of Science* 33(3): 401-417.

Wynne, B. 2014. Further disorientation in the hall of mirrors. *Public Understanding of Science* 23(1): 60-70.