

Technocracy, Liberal Democracy and the Division of Our Time

Feb. 15, 2017 The idea that expertise ought to guide our political life is at odds with the principle of national self-determination.

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I spent last weekend in the [United Arab Emirates](#) at a conference on the future of governance. While there, I was struck by the two principles that underlay this conference and its ilk. The participants' core belief was that human government can be improved, and the means for improving it is [social engineering](#). If we all turn our minds to governance, we can find solutions to the problems. The idea that human government is a permanent thing that reached its perfection in Athens and Jerusalem was not part of the participants' ideology. What was most striking is that sitting within sight of the Gulf - Arab or Persian depending on the viewpoint - in a place of ancient civilizations, the theme was how to engineer the political future.

Less alien, but not less striking, is the manner in which this concept has taken hold in Euro-American civilization. That civilization grew out of the Enlightenment, and its political foundation was the idea of republicanism, an idea that rests on the right of national self-determination. The idea that the nation is the foundation of a moral political life was self-evident to the American and French revolutions and their heirs. The individual and his nation were intimately bound. And the right of a nation's people to govern themselves was central to the nation.

There was, of course, another part of the Enlightenment, the idea that reason ought to be used to improve all things, including government, and the idea that those who had mastered the subject at hand were to be respected and listened to. So an aeronautical engineer (always on my mind when I am at 36,000 feet) should design planes. Experts in governance should design governments.



A man carries a European Union flag outside the Supreme Court in Parliament Square, on Jan. 24, 2017 in London, England. Leon Neal/Getty Images

The idea that expertise ought to guide our political life is at odds with the principle of [national self-determination](#). Expertise means experts, and experts are defined as knowing more than the rest of us. If government ought to rest on expertise, then experts should govern. If government should rest on the consent of the governed, then the premise is that all of us, by virtue of being citizens of a nation, are qualified to determine how the nation ought to be governed.

There is a blended version of this. The people should govern by selecting representatives, then those representatives ought to select experts to work on the details. It seems to me that this is one of those solutions that appears readily soluble but isn't. In selecting a president or prime minister, the people are both imbuing him with power and holding him accountable. The idea of expertise is that governance is so complicated it requires experts to manage it. Very quickly the ability of the elected representative to determine the direction of the nation, or of the possibility of national self-determination, dissolves.

This is not the result of a conspiracy of the experts. The people's expectation of what the state

can do for them has surged, and with it the complexity of the process. Citizens cannot manage the complexity, and elected officials cannot oversee the complexity. By default, the republican system has moved from a relationship between the people and their representatives to one between the people, their representatives and the managers. This process has been underway for a long time, since European states created a permanent civil service to do the bidding of their political masters. And since that time, the civil servants have increasingly managed the system - and managed their political masters.

Over time, the technocrats, who are the experts, developed ambitions and ideology. The ambition was to be free of the meddling hand of politicians and the ignorant whims of the people, and to be free, in the words of the [United States Constitution](#), to build “a more perfect union” without being constrained by the inexpert help of the citizens or government. There was political ambition in this of course, but there was also logic. If history is the unfolding of reason, then those most trained in the application of reason must be allowed to rule. But the truth also was that the creation of a defense plan or a health care system requires expertise that citizens and representatives lack.

At the same time, there was an ideology at work as well, and it was most visible in the [European Union](#). If the goal is to constantly improve governance, then a broader vision than the nation-state is needed. The problems that have to be solved can't be solved within the narrow confines of a single nation-state. The nation stands in the way of improvement. Just as the people are incapable of understanding the technical complexity of the matter at hand, national boundaries are unable to contain the solution.

In going to meetings - and these happen continually and globally - attendees are experts in all areas. They genuinely know many vital things. But in thinking of global problems, they tend to think of national boundaries as impediments to solutions and national self-determination as being of value, as long as nations understand that there is a problem, that they are unlikely to solve it or even understand it, and they are prepared to cede authority to the experts, the technocrats.

In Europe, which was the laboratory for this, there was an attempt to solve the problem. National self-determination was guaranteed, but a complex political process with uncertain authority and little deference to the people governed. Behind it a relatively small but powerful group of technocrats designed and redesigned the details of European life.

It was a reasonable arrangement as long as it worked. The problem with technocracy is that its claim to authority is expertise, and the proof of expertise is success. If the technocracy is seen as a failure, then the technocrats' right to manage the systems is destroyed. But the problem then is that given the complexity of what has been created, even a failed technocracy can argue that it may not have done well, but it can understand the failure better than anyone else. And more likely, the claim will be made that it did not fail, but the remnants of nations, governments

and uneducated people selecting these governments caused it to fail.

There are two questions facing us. First, does the nation still constitute the framework of human life, and is representative democracy competent in managing the state? Second, is the theory of social and political expertise a myth? Are the technocrats competent to manage the complexity that the state has become?

This has become the fundamental issue of our time. From the technocrats' point of view, the idea that the nation should be the primary interest of the state is anachronistic and dangerous. Nationalist movements threaten the ability of experts to govern. From the standpoint of increasing numbers of voters, technocracy usurps the power vested in the people without being able to manage the system successfully.

This has also created a social divide. The Euro-American educational system is constructed on the idea that management is at the center of success. The management of a government, a business, a hospital or a charity depends on expertise. For their social position, members of the managerial class of Euro-American society depend on the idea that they are indispensable to society. They have an obligation to manage well, and they have a right to rewards for good management. As such, this class manages everything from hedge funds to schools and shares in common this sense of social obligation and rights.

That class excluded from the managerial class is increasingly unprepared to concede that the technocrats of the managerial class have earned their benefits. 2008 was important for many reasons, but chief among them, it raised the question of whether the claims of expertise and beneficial social consequences was simply a cover for avarice. Indeed, the argument against technocrats everywhere is that they lack the expertise they claim to have, and their real end is to skew wealth in their favor.

This argument goes along with the argument that the technocrats, rather than increasing their modesty, are increasing their claim to authority and working to eliminate the right to national self-determination. That right derives from the moral equality of all people, and claims that the right to control government derives from a citizen's human rights and interests. It does not rest on an expertise that technocracy claims but doesn't clearly have or use for the common good.

One class is appalled by the rise of nationalism. The other is terrified that in stripping away the nation-state, they will be left helpless. This is not a frivolous argument. It rests directly at the heart of the Enlightenment and of the Euro-American search for representative democracy and expertise. On one side, the complexity of governance is beyond all our ability to grasp. It must have technocrats. On the other, that complexity may be a threat to liberal democracy as first conceived.

This question is at the heart of many of our divisions, and is being discussed daily even when

people don't realize they are discussing it. Technocrats are struggling with how to perfect the world. Citizens are struggling with how not to lose control over their lives. It is not just that they live different lives. It is that they live in different moral universes.