Book Review/Compte rendu

Nico Stehr and **Reiner Grundmann**. *Experts: The Knowledge and Power of Expertise.* Key Ideas. New York: Routledge, 2011, 148 pp. $110.00 hardcover (978-0-415-60803-9)

Experts is published as part of Routledge's "Key Ideas" series that emphasizes short, poignant essays on important and topical issues in the social sciences. The best books in this series (notably Deborah Lupton's *Risk*, 1999) manage to both critically review the field and present an original argument that goes beyond existing works. Stehr and Grundmann's book does just this.

Their essay works at multiple levels. At root, it is about the knowledge society — a well-worn term that still baffles due to its complexity and fluidity — and the authors pay due homage to John Kenneth Galbraith, Daniel Bell, and Michael Polanyi. But Stehr and Grundmann also argue that our dominant conception of the knowledge society, and particularly of knowledge work, is limited precisely because it is inherited from an older time. Terms and concepts that were unproblematic in the classic modern period, such as science, knowledge, information, professions and expertise, are not so self-evident in late modern times. While the sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK) and science and technology studies (STS) have addressed some of these, the unique role of experts and the processes of developing and communicating expertise have gone largely unexamined. For instance, the authors point out that science and expertise are frequently used synonymously in existing literature and common parlance despite the fact that they have different functions, internal norms, communities, and consumers. The main purpose of the book therefore is to rescue the categories of expert and expertise and establish them as independent concepts within and for social science research.

In a way, this project is unfashionable. Much has been written over the last several years about the legitimacy of local, traditional, and lay knowledge, and the suppression of these ways of knowing by others who claim privileged and specialized expertise. Stehr and Grundmann counter this by arguing that experts cannot and do not constitute a social class capable of acting in unity or directly suppressing others. The authors reject outright the frequently heard argument that democracy is

threatened or compromised by an expert-led technocracy or technocratic class. Instead, they posit that the social power of expertise is limited because it is demand driven. This argument, which will be controversial to some, is based on the notion that expertise is about the application (communication, manipulation, use) of knowledge rather than its generation. In order for expertise to be mobilized, there must be a consumer — be it a corporation, a government, or even an individual (drawing on, for example, expertise in financial planning or personal counselling). As consumers, these actors have the ability to ignore the advice given. This is particularly interesting because it strips experts of the social power they are frequently assumed to possess, while maintaining and relocating the power of expertise, which becomes (yet another) tool for actors who can afford it.

Stehr and Grundmann also wade into debates about the crisis of legitimacy facing scientific knowledge in the late modern era. Again, their take is original. For them, scientists are defined as creators of specialized knowledge, while experts are the mediators, appliers, and users of that knowledge — it is experts who bridge the distance between science and society and its institutions. While some in the field will undoubtedly cringe at these distinctions, their point is that the *application* of knowledge is far more open to disagreement and abuse than its *creation* — a nuance that is frequently lost in analyses of scientific controversies. In other words, expertise is usually far more divided on a given issue than is science. To use the example of climate change (as do the authors), the so-called scientific debate over the effects of human activities on global climate is an artifact of expert rather than scientific action. To the unending frustration of climatologists, the leading skeptics of global warming are not generators of knowledge, but commentators on it. With examples such as this, even the most ardent opponent of "typologizing" knowledge will recognize the validity of Stehr and Grundmann's argument. By failing to distinguish between science and expertise, we have left the door open for experts to claim more legitimacy and authority than they likely deserve. This is all the more serious because, as mentioned earlier, expertise is demand driven, which means that it will emerge whenever and wherever there is a willingness to pay for it. Such a unique and critical system deserves its own distinct field of study.

As with any short book, there are bound to be omissions. The influential work of Manuel Castells is not considered, although there are parallels between his notion of "informationalization" and the core arguments in the essay. Technology also plays a smaller role in the narrative than might be expected, although the authors do point out that access to voluminous information via the Internet has increased rather than dimin-

ished the need for experts, as they claim privileged access to the "right" information. If the study of experts and expertise is indeed to become an autonomous area of research, then the relationship between expertise and technology is a natural starting point (Sheldon Ungar has done interesting work in this area). At the very least, Stehr and Grundmann have shone light on some of the unrecognized assumptions in the sociology of knowledge, and provided a provocative launching pad for a more nuanced approach to the knowledge society.

University of Ottawa Nathan Young

Nathan Young is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Ottawa. His research interests include environmental sociology, economic sociology, and the sociology of science and knowledge. His most recent book (with Ralph Matthews) is *The Aquaculture Controversy in Canada: Activism, Policy and Contested Science* (UBC Press, 2010).
nyoung@uottawa.ca