

# The health crisis is shifting the lines between science, politics and society: getting a clearer picture

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Scientists are particularly exposed in the current health crisis, where governments are using their advice to consolidate their decisions. Thus summoned as experts, also by the media, they find themselves both placed in collective responsibility, as is the case with the scientific council mobilised around the French government, and exposed individually. They also constitute a reference point, to which one can refer in order to gradually build up, as a citizen, an understanding of the situation. The role of science within society and in relation to the major political decisions that have to be made is thus extremely active, in various configurations, and subject to multiple pressures. What questions does this situation raise during the crisis? And what can be anticipated as longer-term consequences for the relationship between science and politics?

## Climate and Biodiversity: an increasingly active role for science, not a substitute for politics

2015 marked a key moment for many climate scientists: moving from the era of warnings to the era of solutions. The three special IPCC reports published in 2018-2019 (on scenarios to limit the increase in global average temperature to +1.5°C; on the ocean and cryosphere; on land) and the IPBES Global Assessment Report on the state of the World's biodiversity confirmed this shift. In doing so, the political dimension of the scientists' voice became clearly evident. However, the key word of the institutions created for the science-policy interface at the global level, such as the IPBES or the IPCC, remains unchanged: policy relevant, but not policy prescriptive, i.e. showing the inevitable trade-offs (between the risks of inaction and the cost of action, for example), but without making a choice in the place of legitimate representatives.

However, it is not about sending scientists back to a form of neutrality. The discovery of unknown ecosystems is worth putting their protection needs on the agenda and is thus of an eminently political nature. Greta Thunberg's injunctions to action to political actors, the youth movement, the Extinction Rebellion and the scientists themselves, calling for civil disobedience, also rely above all on science. In a long-term perspective, citizen science, through a participatory construction in various configurations (data collection, definition of the scientific approach, dissemination of knowledge), also contributes to building science at the interface of society and (political) decision-making.

What seemed to be gradually building up around climate and biodiversity was a familiarity, a habit of frequent contact between scientists, politicians and citizens. This habit had made it possible to apprehend the political roles of science in the service of a dynamic clarification of what we know and what we do not know. This is what the precautionary principle is all about: an incentive to act now, and an injunction to do more research, to continue to explore and understand. This familiarisation, although sometimes tense, notably because of the insufficient capacity for collective action in the face of scientific results, was the seed of a better understanding of the possible roles and postures of scientists in our societies struggling with global transformations.

## **Scientists in society: an ambiguous position challenged by the crisis**

From a broader perspective than that of the environmental and climate fields, scientists would hold a particularly ambiguous position in the perception of citizens: both trustworthy, in a general atmosphere of very strong mistrust of institutions; and almost incapable of making their singular voice heard, a voice made up of method and transparency, in the permanent whirlwind of information and data, some of which is not referenced or manipulated, accelerated by social networks.

In this context, the current health crisis and its management suddenly put the spotlight on the functioning of scientific expertise, in a stance that is quite clearly in contrast to what had been built up around environmental and climate issues, opening up at least three types of questioning.

The first question is very well illustrated by the posture of medical expertise as mobilised by the public authorities, in the classic role of adviser to the political decision-maker (cf. the scientific council around the President of the French Republic). Reassuring through its collegiality, guaranteeing the pluralism that is essential for the quality of expertise, and independent of political decision-making and its final responsibility, this figure, which makes it possible to consolidate the authority needed to move forward in times of crisis, nevertheless inevitably interferes with two other issues. Firstly, the dynamic process of science at work, which is in progress, with all the difficulties of imperfect data, the collection of which is itself evolving, and the tensions between an empirical approach without an optimal experimental set-up and the need for scientific validation (cf. Prof. Raoult's activities on chloroquine). Secondly, the risks of excluding non-specialists, users of health services, patients and citizens from the construction of scientific expertise itself in the heat of managing an extremely rapid crisis; it will be essential that the expertise in use by citizens, all directly concerned by this crisis, even beyond the sick, also finds a place, particularly in anticipating and evaluating the impact of crisis management measures on our lives, also so as not to convey (again) the image of an

expertise disconnected from society.

The second question relates to the knowledge mobilised in economic matters, and more broadly to the capacity for ex-ante and ex-post evaluation of the impacts of the crisis and the measures taken, and the credibility of these evaluations, which are indispensable and yet extremely uncertain. Moreover, science will have to ward off attempts at taking over benefits in a nationalist fashion, which is already emerging today. The international institutions of science (the academic community and its journals and conferences) and of expertise (around the WHO, for example) have the function of ensuring the best possible objectification, but care must be taken to guarantee this independence.

The third questioning comes from the role assigned to ecological scientists, invited by the media to help citizens understand the very complex causes of a health crisis rooted in humanity's relations with other compartments of living things. It is essential, albeit an enormous challenge, to listen to the scientific communities in a precautionary manner, at a time when they are called upon to describe a planetary ecosystem of which we are only a tiny part and of which our knowledge, which is progressing incredibly rapidly, is still extremely partial. Scientific ecology nevertheless has its full place, alongside virology, microbiology, epidemiology, geography and other disciplines in the scientific work carried out by multidisciplinary teams and published in the most renowned journals. As a matter of fact, it had very well-informed causal links between ecological dynamics and pandemic risks. Scientific ecology in relation to medicine has developed the concept of "One Health" to unify the issues of ecosystem health, veterinary health and human health: in doing so, it is in fact upsetting not only the arrangement of these scientific disciplines among themselves, but also the forms of organisation in our societies, and we had not yet been able to take the measure or act accordingly. We are now thinking about the changes we would need to make in industrial livestock farming systems, in our relationship with wildlife and international trade, in particular, and all this would need to be driven by a unifying strategic vision. We are far from such a system and, above all, far from knowing how to interact with the scientific communities so that together, citizens, politicians and scientists, we can keep our eyes wide open on our planet and on what we do not know that we do not yet know.

These three questions will interact on the relationship between our societies, our scientists and our politicians, and the combination of their effects can be dizzying. The capacity for global cooperation between scientific communities, which is exceptionally visible in the medical field at the moment, but equally vibrant in the areas of climate and biodiversity, is a key resource for scientific institutions and researchers to find their role in these times of upheaval. Many calls for the construction or mandating of institutions of scientific expertise to explicitly define these interfaces and to ensure that their mandate carries out a strategic response to each of the issues raised in this blogpost. This is indeed essential, as can be seen with the IPBES and the IPCC. But the relationships between science, policy and society also develop in the interstices and individual interactions, and this will require constant attention from each of these actors.

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