

Dizionario
di dottrina sociale della Chiesa

Le cose nuove del XXI secolo



Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore
Centro di Ateneo per la dottrina sociale della Chiesa
Pubblicazione periodica online
<https://www.dizionariodottrinasociale.it>
Fascicolo **20** - Ottobre-Dicembre 2025



VITA E PENSIERO

Dizionario di dottrina sociale della Chiesa

Le cose nuove del XXI secolo

Fascicolo 2025, 4 – Ottobre - Dicembre
Pubblicazione trimestrale / Four issues per year

Direttrice / Editor

Simona Beretta

Comitato di direzione / Editorial Board

Ilaria Beretta, Diego Boerchi, Antonio Campati, Emilio Colombo, Michele Faioli, Laura Maria Ferri, Paolo Gomasasca, Paolo Maggiolini, Vincenzo Tabaglio, Gilberto Turati, Alessandra Vischi

Comitato scientifico internazionale / International Scientific Committee

Helen Alford OP, Francesco Botturi, Paolo G. Carozza, Ferdinando Citterio, Paul H. Dembinski, Martino Diez, Flaminia Giovanelli, James Keenan, David Kirchoffer, Markus Krienke, Mario A. Maggioni, Roberto Maier, Giovanni Marseguerra, Mike Naughton, Mathias Nebel, Sebastiano Nerozzi, Eugenia Scabini, Clemens Sedmak, Anna Maria Tarantola, Stefano Zamagni, Laura Zanfrini

Segreteria di redazione / Editorial Staff

Marco Pedrazzini, Filippo Tocci

Un progetto del Centro di Ateneo per la dottrina sociale della Chiesa dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore

Le voci del Dizionario sono disponibili *open access* sul sito <https://www.dizionariodottrinasociale.it>

La rivista ha adottato il sistema di *double-blind review*

Centro di Ateneo per la dottrina sociale della Chiesa: centro.dottrinasociale@unicatt.it

Redazione / Editorial Board: dizionario.dottrinasociale@unicatt.it

2025 Vita e Pensiero. Pubblicazioni dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore

Largo Agostino Gemelli, 1 - 20123 Milano

Proprietario: Istituto Giuseppe Toniolo di Studi Superiori

Registrazione del Tribunale di Milano del 9 Febbraio 2021, n. 24.

Registered with the Milan Court February 9th, 2021, no. 24.

Pubblicità inferiore al 45%

ISSN (digitale): 2784-8884

www.vitaepensiero.it

Libri Ebook Riviste - Antepreme Notizie Interviste

Anche su     

THE QUESTION OF TRUTH IN PUBLIC DECISIONS

Paolo MONTI

The text explores the relationship between truth, expert knowledge, and public decisions in the digital age, marked by the fragmentation of visibility spaces and the crisis of social intermediation. In particular, it examines the tension between citizens' knowledge and experts' knowledge in philosophical debate and social doctrine, proposing a new "pact of epistemic citizenship" based on pluralistic dialogue, shared responsibilities, and knowledge as a commons.

Keywords: *Truth, Public deliberation, Epistemic citizenship, Public sphere, Common goods.*

La questione della verità nelle decisioni pubbliche

Il testo esplora il rapporto tra verità, conoscenza degli esperti e decisioni pubbliche nell'epoca digitale, segnata dalla frammentazione degli spazi di visibilità e dalla crisi delle intermediazioni sociali. Si esamina in particolare la tensione fra saperi dei cittadini e saperi degli esperti nel dibattito filosofico e nella dottrina sociale, proponendo un nuovo "patto di cittadinanza epistemica" fondato su dialogo pluralista, responsabilità condivise e beni comuni della conoscenza.

Parole chiave: *Verità, Deliberazione pubblica, Cittadinanza epistemica, Sfera pubblica, Beni comuni.*

ERC: SH4_12

The quest for truth and public decisions: an open issue

The crisis in the relationship between knowledge of truth and public decisions has recently taken many forms, following the rapid pace of cultural, political, and technological change. Alarming discussions about post-truth, fake news (see entry *Fake news*), conspiracy theories, health misinformation, climate denialism, and historical revisionism have significant specificities, but also a common root. Digital technologies have made the role of intermediaries in accessing information more marginal, but they have also introduced new forms of mediation, as evident in the case of social media platforms, which favor or disadvantage the visi-

Paolo Monti, Università degli Studi, Milano-Bicocca.

Email: paolo.monti@unimib.it

bility of content based on criteria of maximizing user engagement. This has weakened the role of expert knowledge in the construction, evaluation, and dissemination of information and beliefs that are central to the decisions of citizens and institutions.

A classical question

Within these debates, a classical question arises in contemporary forms. Deliberation among citizens is structurally marked by a tension between the ethical-political imperative of deciding together among free and equal subjects and the epistemic imperative of deciding together among holders of qualitatively unequal knowledge.

In *Theaetetus*, Plato argued with Protagoras' thinking, wondering whether, when the future of the city is at stake, we should perhaps give priority to the knowledge of a physician over the opinions of an inexperienced citizen about the possible outbreak of fever among the population. The question might seem obvious, were it not for the fact that today we would not attach particular reliability to the medical knowledge of the ancients and that Plato's dialogue ends in an aporetic manner, with the impossibility of providing a univocal definition of science. The question, however, is not only epistemic, concerning the status of knowledge, but also ethical and political: in a city inhabited by free and equal people, should public decisions not involve the participation of citizens in order to be fair? This point is also raised by Aristotle in *Politics*, when he emphasizes that the main virtue of citizens lies in their ability to know how to obey and command together, as befits free men who are neither subjects nor tyrants, but together capable of defining and respecting the laws for the good of the city. Active participation in this process of knowledge and deliberation for the common good is, in fact, a fundamental component in realizing a central purpose in the life of humans as "political animals".

The strategy of liberal modernity

Modern liberalism, born in the context of the powerful rise of the scientific method and the consequent technological progress, has largely reinterpreted this classic question by attributing to science a central role

in defining the shared background of public choices. Trust in the universal cognitive abilities of reason is seen as the key to ensuring the progress of society and smoothing out differences among citizens, provided that their reasons are subject to public scrutiny. In this perspective, citizens are equal in that they are endowed with reason, and on this basis, consensus is sought even in the realm of decision-making through the public use of reason, which Kant identifies as the beating heart of the Enlightenment. However, bridging the gap between inequality of knowledge and equality of citizens requires defining which reasons are acceptable in public debate and which should be excluded in order to meet the challenge of growing pluralism. Heir to this tradition, John Rawls, at the end of the last century, defined the scope of public reasoning aimed at justifying norms as a space where «*We appeal to political conceptions of justice, and to ascertainable evidence and facts open to public view, in order to reach conclusions about what we think are the most reasonable political institutions and policies*» (Rawls 1999, 155). While the suggestion to delimit public reasoning around “political conceptions of justice”, thus excluding doctrines of the good and religious worldviews, has sparked debate and controversy, it was less predictable that, a few decades later, even the secure status of scientifically “ascertainable evidence” and “public visibility” on the same facts would in turn become the subject of growing doubts and disputes.

The crisis of expert knowledge as public knowledge

One aspect of the current crisis is linked to the accessibility and neutrality of expert knowledge.

At a basic level, the increasing specialization of knowledge translates into reduced transparency in the processes of constructing public knowledge. As Elijah Millgram has pointed out, when faced with experts’ assertions, citizens often find themselves unable to understand the verification processes that justify them. They must therefore accept these assertions not because they understand their basis and recognize their soundness, but out of deference to the social role of experts, and then find themselves unable to discern when conflicts arise between them.

Even in academic inquiry, the Positivist image of scientific and technological knowledge as an objective and neutral domain has been rethought and reinterpreted through more complex interpretations. Bruno Latour, for example, has highlighted how “scientific facts” are always,

to a significant extent, the result of networks of individual and institutional actors who bring them to the public stage as such. Sheila Jasanoff, in the context of Science and Technology Studies, has emphasized the importance of processes of co-production of knowledge between experts and citizens, to be promoted through institutional tools that make visible not only what we know, but also what is uncertain or controversial. The post-normal science paradigm, developed by Silvio Funtowicz and Jerome Ravetz, has highlighted that, beyond the dreams of certainty of modern science, in many cases the product of scientific research is probabilistic and fraught with uncertainty, suggesting that, when major interests are at stake, public decisions must find hybrid forums where citizens' values are represented.

In an era of global risks, the contribution of expert knowledge to public decisions is certainly indispensable. Yet, at the same time, the reflexivity of the humanities and social sciences emphasizes the importance of exercising a certain epistemic humility and respecting the intellectual autonomy of citizens in choices that have broad collective repercussions.

The erosion of shared visibility spaces

The growing complexity of the public role of “ascertainable evidence” goes hand in hand with the questioning of the existence of a shared “public view” of facts.

In modern societies, the public sphere as a unified space for visibility and discussion of the same facts has developed hand in hand with a set of expert intermediation (see entry *Media*) practices expressed by research institutes and newspapers, universities and local authorities. The idea of being able to rely uncontroversially on a set of “facts open to public view” fits within this frame of reference, which Jonathan Rauch has characterized as a “constitution of knowledge,” that is, the complex process of selecting and rigorously constructing the facts that the public sees and on the basis of which it makes decisions, within the legitimate pluralism of opinions and values.

The complex and problematic nature of the public visibility of facts has been made more evident by the emergence of the new digital public sphere. The success of social media has transformed the space of visibility, marginalizing vertical forms of expert mediation in favor of horizontal mechanisms of dispersion and reaggregation of public attention.

The perimeter of public facts that connects the citizens has thus become confused and fragmented.

In the new spaces of visibility, governed by algorithmic logics of maximizing user engagement and increasingly populated by images and texts produced by generative artificial intelligence, the ability to reconstruct a shared representation of what is happening is blurred and public attention is fragmented. Divided into epistemic bubbles that are homogeneous in terms of content and communication styles, citizens cultivate a relationship with information that is increasingly identity-based rather than epistemic. The public sphere is thus fragmented into a series of separate publics, which discuss “alternative facts” and grow in mutual distrust because they inhabit separate spaces of visibility.

Information and communication technologies have therefore been directed towards business and development models that have made them harbingers of erosion, manipulation, and polarization of democratic processes.

Seeing and discussing together as the liberty of citizens

The problem of still appealing to “ascertainable evidence” and “facts open to public view” can be adequately assessed in terms of its urgency if we place it in the context of the issue we started with: deciding together in the tension between inequality of knowledge and equality of citizens. The inequality of knowledge refers to the different capacity to contribute to the search for truth in a given field, while the equality of citizens signals the importance of recognizing the equal dignity of others (see entry *Human Dignity and Theological Anthropology*). Both of these dimensions signal a connection with truth, on an epistemic and moral level, and are central to the life of the democratic political community.

Public decision-making thrives on this tension and becomes corrupted when the link between the two instances is broken. This break leads to a fundamental loss of freedom for citizens. Citizens constitute a community of free and equal individuals when they are able to participate in public decision-making and are therefore subject to rules that they themselves can help to shape and challenge. The exercise of this public freedom depends on two closely related abilities: the ability to intervene reasonably in discourse and the ability to be in relationships conducive to discussion and deliberation with others. The crisis in the sharing of

expert knowledge and the fragmentation of citizens into separate publics erode these two abilities and, with them, the foundations of freedom.

The freedom of citizens depends, in fact, crucially on the possibility of sharing the experience of seeing and discussing together, which also allows them to decide together as active and non-dominated persons.

The issue of public decision-making in Laudato si'

The reflections expressed in recent years by the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church are not unrelated to the concerns we have outlined so far. In some parts of the encyclical letter *Laudato si'* (2015), public decision-making on environmental issues is specifically addressed (see entry *Environment, Globe, World*). The logic promoted by the text is that of an integral approach, which involves the participatory involvement of all actors, and therefore also the different types of knowledge they possess: «*The participation of the latter also entails being fully informed about such projects and their different risks and possibilities; this includes not just preliminary decisions but also various follow-up activities and continued monitoring*» (*Laudato si'*, 183). In the awareness of emerging uncertainties and complexities, the choice must be guided by a precautionary principle, according to which, if there are well-founded reasons to foresee serious risks, «*the burden of proof is effectively reversed, since in such cases objective and conclusive demonstrations will have to be brought forward to demonstrate that the proposed activity will not cause serious harm to the environment or to those who inhabit it*» (*Laudato si'*, 186). In this type of decision-making process, expert knowledge is crucial, but it must be recognized that its contribution cannot always be decisive: «*there are certain environmental issues where it is not easy to achieve a broad consensus*» and in the open tension between the scientific and political levels of controversy, it is necessary to preserve «*an honest and open debate so that particular interests or ideologies will not prejudice the common good*» (*Laudato si'*, 188).

The bond between politics and truth in Fratelli tutti

These preliminary observations find a broader context and resonance in the encyclical letter *Fratelli tutti* (2020), in which the theme of the link between politics and truth is central.

The document focuses on the connection between the crisis of public discourse and the crisis of democratic life already in its first pages: *«the best way to dominate and gain control over people is to spread despair and discouragement, even under the guise of defending certain values. Today, in many countries, hyperbole, extremism and polarization have become political tools. Employing a strategy of ridicule, suspicion and relentless criticism, in a variety of ways one denies the right of others to exist or to have an opinion. Their share of the truth and their values are rejected and, as a result, the life of society is impoverished and subjected to the hubris of the powerful»* (Fratelli tutti, 15). In this power dynamic, the role of technology is ambiguous. In fact, *«the flood of information at our fingertips does not make for greater wisdom. Wisdom is not born of quick searches on the internet nor is it a mass of unverified data. That is not the way to mature in the encounter with truth»* (Fratelli tutti, 50). Even when digital networks disseminate significant data, this is not enough, as the collective search for truth requires *«to keep our attention focused, to penetrate to the heart of matters»* which is a condition for people's freedom not to become illusory and not to be confused *«with the ability to navigate the internet»* (Fratelli tutti, 50).

The response to this erosion of the relationship between the search for truth and civic life must be sought in a pluralistic and dialogical rethinking of the construction of public decisions. Consistent with the “integral” approach already outlined in *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis suggests here that from the anthropological awareness that human beings cannot *«fully know themselves apart from an encounter with other persons»* (Fratelli tutti, 87) also follows the epistemological conviction that *«there is no one solution, no single acceptable methodology, no economic recipe that can be applied indiscriminately to all. Even the most rigorous scientific studies can propose different courses of action»* (Fratelli tutti, 165). In this sense, *«Public discussion, if it truly makes room for everyone and does not manipulate or conceal information, is a constant stimulus to a better grasp of the truth, or at least its more effective expression»* (Fratelli tutti, 203).

A new pact of epistemic citizenship

The path taken so far suggests a complex and changing reality that does not allow for simple solutions, but perhaps a plurality of responses that reflectively take on the task of change. If citizens' freedom relies on their ability to intervene reasonably in discourse and to engage in

relationships conducive to deliberation with others, new conditions are needed for both.

From the perspective of democratic citizenship ethics (see entry *Citizenship*), creating the conditions for reasonable participation in public discourse is a task that calls on everyone, experts and non-experts alike. There are mutual duties between the scientific community and citizens in recognizing and respecting the epistemic practices appropriate for selecting the beliefs to be introduced into the public justification of norms according to rigorous public discussion methods, open to critical review and such as not to cause harm in the medium and long term.

Respect for the intellectual autonomy of citizens requires that expert knowledge plays a central role in public decision-making processes within relationships that are not based on deference but on recognition. Knowing how to identify whether or not a belief derives from a process of verification by multiple experts according to known criteria and transparent procedures is a more accessible skill than knowing how to participate in the process itself. The purpose of public education is to prepare the citizens and transmit the epistemic and civic virtues necessary to take on this task, as well as to recognize that new technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence (see entry *Artificial Intelligence, philosophical questions*), can change this task over time and open up periods of uncertainty before a consensus on new standards is reestablished. For this reason, too, in a pact of “epistemic citizenship” that requires citizens to exercise this kind of discernment, experts are in turn required to recognize and respect the intellectual autonomy of citizens, both in the way they communicate with them and in the scientific and ethical rigor with which they perform their role. The recommendation to embrace a comprehensive approach to public debate, where the contribution of individual specialist knowledge is part of a broader horizon of knowledge and values, provides an appropriate framework for this type of pact.

Visibility spaces as common goods

The second condition conducive to citizens’ freedom is the possibility of inhabiting relationships that allow for the experience of “seeing and discussing together,” even in a scenario marked by new forms of technological intermediation. The problem of the fragmentation of the public sphere into separate publics can be addressed on at least two levels:

the exercise of attention as a civic virtue and the recognition of spaces of public visibility as common goods.

The algorithmic manipulation of attention (see entry *The integration of media and machines: algorithms and daily life*) is one of the most vulnerable points of public discourse, because it is subject to the mechanism underlying the formation of epistemic bubbles and their degeneration into echo chambers. In this context, the individual and collective actions of citizens can become a decisive point of resistance, in the form of a virtuous disposition to exercise attention as opposition to the mechanisms of aggregation and dispersion of public gaze that characterize digital platforms.

This type of resistance, however, must find recognition and support at the institutional level, because it opposes logics inscribed within powerful and pervasive technological environments that exceed the agency of individuals and specific groups. The dynamics of domination that erode the conditions of citizens' freedom must be opposed by the awareness that the possibility of maintaining a shared relationship with the truth is a decisive element of the common good and that, therefore, spaces of public visibility are common goods of information and democratic deliberation. Taking up Elinor Ostrom's lesson on the commons and the pluralistic vision of public decision-making expressed in recent social doctrine, it is becoming increasingly clear that if knowledge is a fundamental common good, every space of visibility where citizens come together to face reality and discuss about it must be structured in a way that is consistent with its nature as a "public matter".

Bibliography

Latour B. (1993), *We Have Never Been Modern*, Harvard University Press.

Ostrom E. and Hess, C. (2007), *Understanding Knowledge as a Commons*, MIT Press.

Plato (2014), *Theaetetus*, Oxford University Press.

Rauch J. (2021), *The Constitution of Knowledge*, Brookings.

Rawls J. (1999), *The Law of Peoples*, Harvard University Press.