The Political Uses of Expert Knowledge

Why do politicians and civil servants commission research, and what use do they make of it in policymaking? The received wisdom is that research contributes to improving government policy. Christina Boswell challenges this view, arguing that policymakers are just as likely to value expert knowledge for two alternative reasons: as a way of lending authority to their preferences; or to signal their capacity to make sound decisions. Boswell develops a compelling new theory of the role of knowledge in policy, showing how policymakers use research to establish authority in contentious and risky areas of policy. She illustrates her argument with an analysis of European immigration policies, charting the ways in which expertise becomes a resource for lending credibility to controversial claims, underpinning high-risk decisions or bolstering the credibility of government agencies. This book will make fascinating reading for those interested in the interface between policymaking, academic research and political legitimacy.

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Immigration Policy and Social Research

CHRISTINA BOSWELL
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In summer 2004, in a rather cluttered and smoky office in Osnabrück University, Michael Bommes remarked that maybe I should ‘have a look at this organizational studies literature – you know, March, Simon, that lot’. Until then, I had been battling on with a rather arid combination of analytical political theory and political science literature on public policy. Michael’s suggestion was spot on. Neo-institutionalist organization theory, along with a dose of Luhmann’s systems theory, has provided a really fruitful way of making sense of how policymakers draw on research. I am convinced that political science has much more to gain from this literature (as my long-suffering colleagues at Edinburgh are doubtless fed up of hearing by now).

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