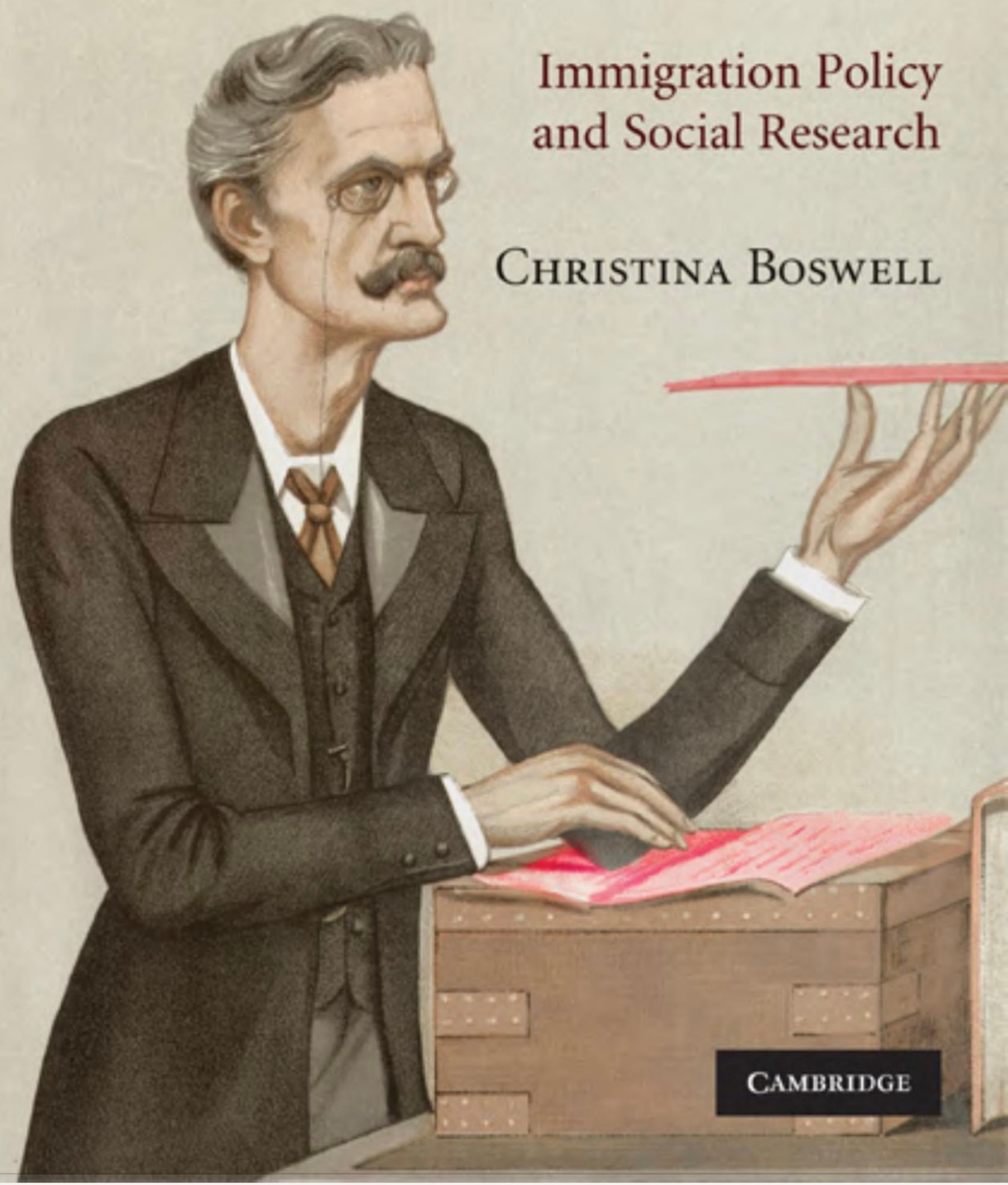


The Political Uses of Expert Knowledge

Immigration Policy
and Social Research

CHRISTINA BOSWELL



CAMBRIDGE

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107404410

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First published 2009

First paperback edition 2011

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Boswell, Christina.

The political uses of expert knowledge : immigration policy and social
research / by Christina Boswell.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-51741-6

1. European Union countries – Emigration and immigration – Government
policy. 2. Emigration and immigration – Research – European Union

countries. 3. Political planning – European Union countries. 4. Policy sciences – Case
studies. 5. Knowledge, Sociology of – Case studies. I. Title.

JV7590.B69 2009

325.4–dc22

2009010744

ISBN 978-0-521-51741-6 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-40441-0 Paperback

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PART I

*The political functions
of knowledge*

The problem-solving account of the role of knowledge in policymaking appears to be *prima facie* plausible, and may well characterize some cases in which policymakers solicit research to guide policy. It certainly corresponds to the self-perception of many officials and politicians engaged in knowledge utilization. When asked why they value research, policymakers typically emphasize the importance of filling knowledge gaps as a means of improving policies. Similarly, those engaged in policy research often conceive their role as that of providing knowledge that underpins adjustments to policy, or assisting in the development of new programmes. This notion of problem-solving research has been criticized by a number of scholars, who argue that the reality rarely conforms to this neat model. Instead, research tends to have a more diffuse, gradual and indirect impact on policy. Often its greatest contribution is to influence the background perceptions and attitudes of policymakers, through a more incremental process (Nutley *et al.* 2007: 36–7). This is what Carol Weiss famously termed the ‘enlightenment’ function of knowledge (Weiss 1979). However, even on this more nuanced account of knowledge utilization, the assumption remains that research is valued first and foremost as a means of influencing policy. Policy-relevant knowledge is produced and used in order to adjust policy output – even though it is acknowledged that its influence is somewhat less direct than the problem-solving account implies. In effect, then, such critiques modify the instrumentalist account but do not essentially break with it.⁸

This book challenges the instrumentalist account. The starting-point for my argument is that this account presents us with a puzzle. It has frequently been observed that in many policy areas, political debate and decisions systematically fail to take into account research findings. Indeed, government officials and politicians are repeatedly criticized precisely for failing to base policies on existing research findings (Clark and Majone 1985; Owens 2005). There is often a substantial gap between policies that are adopted in areas such as criminal justice, education, welfare, migration or foreign policy, and the prescriptions of research. This is the case even in instances where government agencies have commissioned or carried out such research themselves

⁸ For this reason, I use the term ‘instrumental’ to cover the various ways in which knowledge influences policy output, including the ‘enlightenment’, ‘conceptual’ and ‘catalytic’ functions. See also Weingart 1999.

(Nutley *et al.* 2007: 18). The apparent disregard of research findings is also characteristic of administrative agencies that have set up their own in-house research units. Researchers based in ministries or government agencies often complain that they have only marginal input into decision-making. In short, there are strong indications that research being produced or commissioned by these agencies is not being used to inform policy.

What accounts for this gap? One typical explanation is that electoral pressures tend to trump the injunctions of expert knowledge. Politicians and officials are driven first and foremost by political exigencies, and so end up ignoring evidence where it fails to support more electorally appealing courses of action (Walsh 2000; O'Connor 2001: 3). This is especially likely to be the case in areas that are subject to populist styles of debate, such as crime or immigration. There is often a substantial gap between the sorts of policy advocated by experts in a field, and those that meet the approval of public opinion and the mass media. Even where ministries have commissioned research themselves, it ends up gathering dust on a shelf because of the political unfeasibility of its policy implications.

Another explanation is that policymakers are unable to make effective use of expert knowledge (Guston *et al.* 1997). The research may be relevant and potentially very helpful, but organizations lack the resources that would enable them to make use of it. This may be because of a lack of time to digest research findings, or insufficient capacity to grasp their implications. Or it may simply be that keeping abreast of research is not high on the list of priorities of the organization. Thus although there is plenty of research available, and of a kind that is highly pertinent to policy problems, it is not being picked up on by those making policy.

A third, related, explanation locates the responsibility for deficient take-up of research with the producers of knowledge themselves. On this account, the research produced may be too abstract or lack relevance to the policy problems at hand. Alternatively, it may simply not be structured and presented in an accessible way. In this case, failure to align policy to research recommendations can be attributed to a problem of knowledge transfer. It is generated by more or less endemic problems of communication between researchers and policymakers.

Each of these explanations has some truth in it, and the three accounts will be examined in greater depth in subsequent chapters. But none of

them can offer a satisfactory answer to the puzzle. The problem is that none of the three explanations – political pressures, lack of organizational capacity, or lack of relevant knowledge – can account for the *continued* interest of policymakers in research. If policymakers really are constrained from pursuing evidence-based approaches because of electoral considerations, why do they persist in commissioning and making use of expert knowledge? Equally, if there are administrative or scientific impediments to drawing on research, what explains policymakers' motivation to continue commissioning and carrying out research?

The contention of this book is that research is in fact highly valued by policymakers, and that it plays a crucial role in policymaking and political argumentation. But the value of expert knowledge does not lie exclusively, or even predominantly, in its contribution to policy. Research does indeed play an important political function, but this is not necessarily an instrumental one. Instead, it has two types of more symbolic use. The first of these symbolic uses is what I call a *legitimizing* function. By being seen to draw on expert knowledge, an organization can enhance its legitimacy and potentially bolster its claim to resources or jurisdiction over particular policy areas. In this sense the use of knowledge can endow government agencies with what has been described as 'epistemic authority' (Geuss 2001: 18–19; Herbst 2003: 484). The perception that individual officials, departments or agencies possess reliable, relevant and detailed knowledge, or at least that they have regular access to such knowledge, creates confidence that their decisions will be well founded. This is especially likely to be the case where there is an institutional culture that places value on knowledge – as, for example, in the case of the Labour administration's emphasis on evidence-based policy.

The second function of knowledge applies not so much to how research can endow organizations and their members with legitimacy, but rather the way in which expert knowledge can lend authority to particular policy positions. Expert knowledge can help substantiate an organization or political party's policy preferences, and undermine those of rival agencies or organized interests. This way of using knowledge can be termed the *substantiating* function of knowledge. It will be especially relevant in highly contested policy areas. In the cases of both legitimizing and substantiating knowledge usage, drawing on expert knowledge can be said to have a symbolic rather than a substantive

value: it enhances the credibility of agencies or policy positions, rather than improving the quality of an organization's output. It is not so much the content of knowledge that is being valued, as the signal it conveys about the credibility of an organization or its policies.

The purpose of this book is to explore these alternative functions of knowledge in policymaking. The book develops a theory of the conditions under which knowledge is likely to be valued for these three different functions: instrumental, legitimizing or substantiating. And it explores a number of cases in which knowledge has been used in these respective ways in the context of policymaking and party political mobilization.

Explaining the political uses of knowledge

Prevailing theories

The notion that research can play alternative functions in policymaking may not sound particularly radical. It is a theme that is taken up in a number of seminal contributions to science and technology studies. Notable among these is Sheila S. Jasanoff's exploration of the problematic role of experts in both informing and legitimizing policy in US regulation and court decisions (Jasanoff 1994, 1995b). Other authors have analysed how scientific credibility is constructed and contested in public policy debates (Gieryn 1999; Weingart 1999). Yaron Ezrahi provides a compelling historical account of how scientific knowledge has been harnessed to legitimize political power in the twentieth century (Ezrahi 1990). These and other contributions explore broad issues relating to the social and cultural construction of epistemic authority, and how this affects the role of science in public policy.⁹

Yet these themes have received surprisingly little attention in mainstream political science and political sociology literature. There is almost no scholarship systematically linking these insights to theories of the policy process. Most studies examining the uses of knowledge from the perspective of public policy display a bias towards problem-solving theory. This is most obviously the case with self-professed rational choice accounts (Berman 1998; McNamara 1998). But one finds similar assumptions in the wider literature on knowledge transfer.

⁹ For overviews of these debates, see Weingart 1999; Williams *et al.* 1998.