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Government Statistical Agencies and The Politics of Credibility

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Are official statistics an appropriate subject of study for political scientists? A casual look at the subject yields a resounding yes. As Andreas Georgiou—the head of the independent Greek statistical agency Elstat who was later sentenced to 2 years probation for faking national fiscal data—put it: “statistics is a combat sport.”

Yet, scandal aside, the production of official statistics has a way of rendering its subtle politics more impervious to study. After all, statisticians and economists in the civil service are primarily responsible for keeping national statistical systems humming. They tend not to think of themselves, or their work, as having a politics to it. And the tables and figures they produce have a way of erasing their own political and social histories. Official statistics are infrastructure precisely because they are taken for granted. They can be taken for granted because the political struggles that define them rarely play out at the mass level, and are sometimes—but not always—encoded in technical conflicts. Political
scientists, for whom official statistics are typically no more than data to be mined, may find themselves in *terra incognita* here.

The same cannot be said for Cosmo Howard. His book, *Government Statistical Agencies and the Politics of Credibility*, is thoroughly researched, challenging, and brimming with useful insights on how political institutions, culture, and above all the quest for credibility, alter the allocation of statistical authority in liberal democracies. The project is an ambitious one, investigating official statistics in five countries (Australia, Canada, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States) and drawing on 85 interviews with top officials. The empirical focus is also capacious. Unlike other studies, Howard does not limit his analysis to one sort of official statistics or another—say, population counts or national income statistics. Instead, the book aims to examine how elected governments steer the production of the whole range of official statistics. Why, Howard asks, might official statistics in one country be more subject to political control while others are more insulated from politics?

The study is an exploratory one, and this makes sense. Until fairly recently, there have been few efforts to explicitly theorize the production of official statistics. The research that followed from William Alonso and Paul Starr's pioneering edited volume, *The Politics of Numbers* (1987), can best be described as belonging to an empirical genre rather than a coherent research literature. Still, Howard offers a theoretical framework to bound his analysis; drawing on Erving Goffman's work on dramaturgy, he argues that both elected politicians and official statisticians face “performative credibility imperatives” which shape how national statistical authorities are constructed. Against a backdrop of distrust, elected officials draw on “neutral” official numbers to legitimate their decisions. At the same time, they have incentives to preempt or otherwise subvert the production of official statistics that clash with their most important policy imperatives. Statisticians also seek credibility, and employ a variety of means to accomplish it, ranging from efforts to create an impression of technical competence to the production of policy-relevant reports. Relevance and technical competence, unsurprisingly, often find themselves at loggerheads.

Each country’s unique administrative tradition, in Howard’s view, affects how politicians and statisticians perform credibility, and hence the allocation of statistical authority. Canada’s central statistical agency, Statistics Canada, exists as a ministerial department rather than an independent agency. Nevertheless, the agency’s chief has secured autonomy through informal norms and collegial relationships between Deputy Ministers. By contrast, in the U.S.—especially in recent decades—Howard argues that administrative traditions of “partisan appointments, layering and impermanence create conflicting pressure for statistical agencies to appear nonpartisan but develop strong public profiles and close connections to the White House.”

Interestingly, while administrative traditions matter, state structures—including federalism and presidentialism—have little bearing on the development of national statistical systems. Indeed, Howard strikingly shows similarities between the decentralization of official statistics in countries as politically disparate as the United States and Sweden.

There are, as I see it, three striking and important findings in Howard's study. First, Howard shows that while politicians have incentives to meddle in official statistics for short-term gain, they are rarely successful at doing so. In liberal democracies, meddling with official statistics is relatively difficult to
hide, invites challenges and scrutiny from opposition politicians, and can be self-undermining, since it nets a loss in the credibility that politicians seek when they employ official statistics. Witness the Trump administration's failed attempt to include a citizenship question on the 2020 U.S. Census, which was engineered to reduce participation in urban, Democratic strongholds with large undocumented populations. Not only was the maneuver struck down by the Supreme Court, it generated a counter-mobilization from officials in states, cities, and community-based organizations, who raised the salience of the census and helped to generate population even among historically undercounted communities.

The politics of government statistical agencies tends to be baked into their organizational DNA, what Terry Moe would call a "politics of bureaucratic structure". As the historical material in Howard's book shows across all national contexts, parties of the left and center-left were instrumental in building up national statistical systems to shore up Keynesian statecraft. In Australia, the Labour government of George Whitlam played a central role in building the capacity of national statistical agencies to support its expansion of policy commitments. In turn, conservative governments—including those of Ronald Reagan (US), Margaret Thatcher (UK), Carl Bildt (Sweden), and Stephen Harper (Canada)—have tended to support efforts to dismantle or defund national statistical agencies. While Howard does not explicitly try to account for the differences in these retrenchment efforts, their success has varied considerably, a fact which merits further cross-national study.

A third interesting finding concerns the tension that government statisticians face in maintaining a reputation for neutral competence and responsiveness while being responsive to the needs of elected officials. Not all statisticians in Howard's study see this tension as significant, of course. Yet his interviews suggest that when statistical agencies expect usefulness to follow automatically from neutral competence, they may soon find themselves subject to severe episodes of retrenchment. This trade-off, however, can be managed through the involvement of statistical end-users in the process of developing, maintaining, and adapting the array of statistical products offered by national agencies.

The upshot of these findings, Howard concludes, is that fears of the “death of expertise” are wildly exaggerated. Official statistics, like much of the work of government, are of course deeply politicized. Politicians—even populist opponents of technocracy—often rely on official statistics to bolster their claims of legitimacy. And, while efforts to dismantle or deconstruct official statistics continue, this should be seen as a more enduring feature of politics than a disturbing new trend. This is true as far as it goes: it will take more than a Donald Trump, or even a Barack Obama, to alter the U.S. Official Poverty Measure. Though, after the disturbing events of January 6, 2021, one does wonder about how future election results will be interpreted in a context of right-wing populist outrage.

At times, Howard's text lacks the kind of exposition one hopes to see in a qualitative text built around rich interview data. Greater use of direct quotations from interviews, official documents, and news sources would have added life to the text, while also providing the reader with greater confidence in the conclusions the author draws. For a volume on official statistics, I could not help but feel that the stakes of specific numbers, and the numerical controversies themselves, often felt absent from the book. The drawback in choosing each country's statistical system as the unit of analysis, rather than specific kinds of official statistics, is that crucial within-country variations can be eclipsed or undertheorized. After all, census population data, poverty statistics, and unemployment rates are
arguably very different animals not only across countries but within countries. The literature on “national knowledge regimes” suffers from the same challenge. Nevertheless, one of the great things about Howard's book is that it affords many opportunities for future within-country studies to expand on and probe the conclusions he reaches here. In sum, this is a useful empirical study which will become an essential text in the political economy of official statistics, a field which this reviewer hopes will flourish in years to come.